

GLADYS
MITCHELL

THE
MURDER OF
BUSY LIZZIE



The Murder of Busy Lizzie

Gladys Mitchell

BRADLEY 46
1973

cover



A 3S digital back-up edition 1.0
[click for scan notes and proofing history](#)

Contents

<u>CHAPTER ONE: HOLIDAY WITH PROSPECTS</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND SPECULATION</u>
<u>CHAPTER THREE: ROOMS AND VIEWS</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOUR: LIZZIE'S ISLAND</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIVE: THE MISSING HOSTESS</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIX: FIRST MISGIVINGS</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVEN: THE BODY IN THE SEA</u>
<u>CHAPTER EIGHT: THE USUAL ROUTINE</u>
<u>CHAPTER NINE: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS</u>
<u>CHAPTER TEN: BOAT AND SCRAMBLE</u>
<u>CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE WITCHES' CAVERN</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWELVE: ORDEAL BY WATER</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTEEN: UNSATISFACTORY VERDICT</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOURTEEN: PURSUIT OF A VENDETTA?</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTEEN: ARIADNE'S STRING-BOX</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIXTEEN: INTO THE MAZE</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE END OF THE STRING</u>

By the same author

DEAD MAN'S MORRIS
COME AWAY DEATH
ST. PETER'S FINGER
PRINTER'S ERROR
BRAZEN TONGUE
HANGMAN'S CURFEW
WHEN LAST I DIED
LAURELS ARE POISON
THE WORSTED VIPER
SUNSET OVER SOHO
MY FATHER SLEEPS
THE RISING OF THE MOON
HERE COMES A CHOPPER
DEATH AND THE MAIDEN
THE DANCING DRUIDS
TOM BROWN'S BODY
GROANING SPINNEY
THE DEVIL'S ELBOW
THE ECHOING STRANGERS
MERLIN'S FURLONG
FAINTLY SPEAKING
WATSON'S CHOICE
TWELVE HORSES AND THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE
THE TWENTY-THIRD MAN
SPOTTED HEMLOCK
THE MAN WHO GREW TOMATOES
SAY IT WITH FLOWERS
THE NODDING CANARIES
MY BONES WILL KEEP
ADDERS ON THE HEATH
DEATH OF A DELFT BLUE
PAGEANT OF MURDER
THE CROAKING RAVEN
SKELETON ISLAND

THREE QUICK AND FIVE DEAD

DANCE TO YOUR DADDY

GORY DEW

LAMENT FOR LETO

A HEARSE ON MAY-DAY

LONDON

MICHAEL JOSEPH

First published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph Ltd

52 Bedford Square, London, W.C.1

1973

© 1973 by Gladys Mitchell

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Copyright owner

ISBN 0 7181 1127 3

Set and printed in Great Britain by

Tonbridge Printers Ltd, Peach Hall Works, Tonbridge, Kent in Times ten on twelve point on paper supplied by

P. F. Bingham Ltd, and bound by Dorstel Press at Harlow, Essex

To my most delightful friend

MURIEL SPENCE

CHAPTER ONE

Holiday with Prospects

‘Who can despair whom hope doth bear?’

Sir Philip Sidney



Well,’ said Marius Lovelaine, taking back the letter he had given his wife to read, ‘there are few things in life more welcome than a well-earned, well-planned holiday.’

‘Well-earned maybe,’ responded his wife, ‘but I don’t see where well-planned fits in. It seems to me that Eliza is doing the planning, and from what little I remember of her...’

‘Oh, well, this is Easter. We have plenty of time. All the same, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, my dear, and, from the warm tone of this letter, I fancy that Lizzie’s pudding will be worth the sampling.’

‘Maybe. For my own part, I would sooner go to Southend or Margate or even to one of those holiday camps which Sebastian tried last year and did not like, than stay in your sister’s loathsome little boarding-house, on an almost uninhabited island.’

‘Private hotel, Clothilde. In fact, I believe she likes it to be known as a country club.’

‘What a lot of high-falutin’ nonsense! It’s nothing more than a very inferior guest-house. I don’t suppose it’s got so much as a table licence! As for her scale of charges, we could at least have had a package holiday abroad for that amount of money. Trust Eliza not to give something for nothing, even to her closest relative, and, as matters stand, you are scarcely that!’

‘She has merely sent me her printed brochure, my dear, with the letter of invitation, and even if she does expect to charge us something for board and lodging, we have to remember that the hotel is her only means of livelihood.’

‘Then what has happened to all the money which that eccentric old lady bequeathed her when she left her the house and grounds on that barren little island?’

‘I don’t think there can be much of that money left, dear. Lizzie must have spent the earth on converting the house into an hotel and putting in all those improvements.’

‘What improvements?’

‘Well, according to the brochure, she has built a considerable extension to the place—’

‘In the form of draughty little chalets—’

‘And then she mentions extra bathrooms in the house itself, a sunken garden,

a hard tennis court, miniature golf, billiards, table tennis—’

‘Oh, in an outlandish place like that I expect she got all the work done on the cheap, unless her fancy man paid for some of it.’

‘She would hardly have a lover at her age, my dear. Besides, that old business was finished with when the baby was adopted. Look, Clothilde, I was sorry and ashamed when my parents quarrelled with her all those years ago, and I was most disappointed when you met her at our wedding and disliked her, so I regard this letter as a genuine olive-branch which we would be well-advised to accept.’

‘Olive-branch do you call it? She only wants us there so that we can be made to pay through the nose for poor food and a couple of attics.’

‘I hardly think she will expect us to roost in the rafters, my dear. However, that we shall see. But please allow me to finish. I am particularly anxious to accept the olive-branch I feel she is holding out, because I hope it may very well lead to our ultimate advantage, especially if we can prevail upon Sebastian and Margaret to go with us.’

‘Which they will refuse to do. I can tell you that before you ask them.’

‘Even if I point out that they may stand to gain by accompanying us to the island?’

‘I should have thought Eliza was the person who would stand to gain if we go. Three bedrooms and full board for a whole month! I can tell you what has happened. She has rooms going begging now that everybody either goes abroad or takes a touring holiday by car with nothing but over-night stops. She probably thinks it better to have *our* money than none at all. Besides, who wants to stay on a two-by-four island where the steamer calls only three times a week in mid-season, once a week at other times, and not at all if the weather is bad?’

‘You still don’t allow me to finish. The point is this: Lizzie, after all these years, has written to me in a friendly, sisterly way—’

‘In a grasping, sisterly way, I suppose you mean!’

‘Please, my dear! Compelled thereto by you and my parents, I may have cut myself off from her, but the fact remains that I am her next of kin. When she passes on—and perhaps I may remind you that she is seven years my senior and that my health has always been good—I stand the best chance of anybody of inheriting whatever she leaves.’

‘Oh, nonsense, Marius! Even if what she has to leave is worth anything, have you forgotten the boy Ransome?’

‘My dear, you know as well as I do that Ransome is a fly-by-night, born on

the wrong side of the blanket when Lizzie was a headstrong girl of twenty. Long before he was born my parents had made all arrangements to have him adopted. I don't suppose Lizzie has seen him since he was about six weeks old, if that. She couldn't possibly have any feeling for him now.'

'I wouldn't be too sure about that. Blood is thicker than water—or so they say.'

'They also say that it's a good deal nastier, and that's true, anyhow. No, no, my dear, Lizzie blotted her copybook and was only too thankful, I'm sure, to tear out the untidy page.'

'That is not the story I heard. I was told—and on good authority, too—that the father would willingly have married Eliza if his wife could have been persuaded to divorce him. Ransome was a love-child, in every sense of the word, and we cannot lose sight of the fact that he may very well have remained so.'

'After thirty years? Really, my dear, I can hardly believe that!'

'Ransome is near enough thirty years old, then,' said Clothilde in a reminiscent tone.

'Oh, yes, he will be thirty on his next birthday, I suppose.'

'Then, surely, Marius, he is old enough to know his rights and to insist on them. He will see that he is on the spot as soon as Eliza goes, and will help himself to the pickings, if there are any. You may depend on that.'

'But if he was formally adopted he has no claim on Lizzie any more.'

'Be that as it may, how do you know that she has not married and had legitimate children?'

'Oh, we should have heard.'

'I'd like to be certain of that. Besides, Ransome may not have been legally adopted. He may have been fostered.'

'Clothilde, my dear, let me play this hand my own way. What happens to Lizzie's property depends, after all, on Lizzie's will.'

'And you really think that your spending a month with her after all these years of estrangement will cause her to make a will in your favour?'

'Or in favour of our children, if they play their cards sensibly.'

'Really, Marius, you are singularly naïf. Besides, we don't know that the children will wish to fall in with your plans. They cut loose from us last summer and the summer before, even when I thought the holidays we had planned would be interesting and even exciting for them, so I cannot imagine that a boring sojourn on Eliza's tight little island will appeal to them. Have you sounded them in any way?'

‘You know I have not. There has been no time. Since this Easter vacation began they never seem to be in the house, or, if one of them is here, the other is not.’

‘Well, if you expect them to put themselves out in order to make a good impression on their aunt, I’m afraid you’re in for a grave disappointment.’

‘Not if I point out that there may be something substantial in it for them. They are quite old enough to understand and appreciate *that* kind of argument.’ Marius raised his voice and called his children’s names. They took their time about answering him, but came into the room at last, a handsome pair separated in age by only two years.

The son, a tall youth of twenty, favoured his mother in looks although not in disposition. He was casual where she was intense; clever, whereas she was inclined to be stupid; but he had her large hazel eyes, her straight nose and her sensuous, curved mouth and expressive, strong hands. His sister was not very much like either of her parents. She was small and fair, with greenish eyes and an appearance of fragility which was entirely misleading. Both children preferred one another’s society to that of anybody else, although Sebastian had made tentative unsuccessful sexual experiments during his first year at college and Margaret had several young men who partnered her as opportunity offered, but to none of whom she was in any way committed.

‘Did you want us, Father?’ she asked.

‘Otherwise I should not have called you, my dear girl,’ Marius replied. ‘Sit down. I have something I wish to discuss with both of you.’

‘It’s not a rise in our allowance, by any chance?’

‘Well, it might run to that, if all goes well.’

‘Is that a promise?’

‘Give him a chance!’ muttered Sebastian. ‘It’s no good trying to rush him.’

‘Well, it’s about the summer holiday,’ said Marius, eyeing his boy with the faint dislike which some fathers feel for their adolescent sons. ‘It is a long way off, so I doubt very much whether you have made any plans yet.’

‘I’ve had a chance to go with a reading-party to Sweden,’ said Sebastian, ‘but I don’t know that I’m all that keen.’

‘We wondered whether you’d sub up for both of us to go to Greece,’ said Margaret.

‘Greece?’ repeated Marius, as though he were giving thought to the proposition, an attitude which deceived neither of his children.

‘No, I suppose not,’ said Sebastian resignedly.

‘Now, now, just wait a moment, my boy. I think Greece might be a very good idea—later on.’

‘Never jam today!’ muttered Margaret.

‘By “later on” I meant towards the end of your Long Vacation, of course. We will go into ways and means. There is just one important point, though. I don’t think that either your mother or I would consider allowing the pair of you to go to Greece alone. What about one of these Hellenic cruises? I believe they are very well thought of.’

‘Lecture tours and the culture spread out like bird-lime? Hardly a holiday,’ said Sebastian.

‘You think not? Well, we’ll see, then. But first you may care to hear what else I have to propose. Read this letter and look at the brochure.’

‘Heavens!’ said Sebastian, when he had carried out these instructions. ‘Park ourselves on a chunk of granite in the rain and the south-west winds? What on earth should we find to do there?’

‘It’s an island. I like islands,’ said his sister.

‘Yes, for a couple of days, perhaps, but this letter suggests the whole of July. Who is this woman, anyway? Lizzie? We don’t know anybody called Lizzie, do we?’

‘She is my only sister,’ said Marius.

‘Why haven’t we heard of her before?’

‘There were reasons.’

‘A family row, I suppose. The letter reads like that.’

‘Yes, there were family differences, but now that your aunt has extended the olive-branch—’

‘If I hear that word one more time I shall scream and beat my breast,’ said Clothilde.

‘Oho!’ exclaimed her son. ‘A difference of opinion, is there? You’re not in the market for olive-branches, Boob darling?’

‘Don’t call me that! And don’t be so aggravating, Sebastian. A difference of opinion between your father and myself is unthinkable and is no concern of yours, anyway. As for that horrible nickname, I detest it!’

‘But you *do* boob, darling. Look at you at the Singletons’ sherry party last November! I nearly died of shame.’

‘If you hadn’t broken your glass and so attracted everybody’s attention, nobody would have noticed what I said.’

‘Darling, I sacrificed my social competence just to cover up for you.’

Actually—'

'I think that will do,' said his father. 'I do not care for the nickname you have for your mother. It is neither kind nor respectful. Let us return to the subject under discussion and express our views in a courteous and reasonable way.'

'So we're to be the reply to the olive-branch, are we?' said Sebastian, making an impudent face at his mother.

'If you will allow me to continue: your aunt was left an estate on the island of Great Skua, together with an appreciable amount of money, on condition that she lived on the property and developed it. This she appears to have done to the best of her ability and with considerable success. She has made alterations and additions to the house and has turned it into a prosperous hotel. She has added amenities of all kinds and these, as you have seen, she proposes that we shall enjoy for a month of our summer vacation.'

'At a price,' put in Clothilde resentfully.

'Naturally we shall not expect her to accommodate us free of charge, since we can well afford to pay,' explained Marius to his children.

'We could afford to pay for other sorts of holiday, too,' said Sebastian. 'Why should we bury ourselves alive in order to patch up a family squabble?'

'There is no question of patching anything up. As I see it, your aunt has extended this...' Marius caught his wife's eye '... this kind invitation to us to go and visit her, and I have an excellent reason for accepting it.'

'Is she—I mean, has she a family?' asked Margaret.

'Well, there, my dear, you go to the root of the matter. She is unmarried and has no dependents...'

'Except an illegitimate son,' said Clothilde.

'Oh, dear!' said Sebastian. 'Ought Margaret to be allowed to hear the rest of this conversation?'

'You mean she was silly enough to let somebody give her a baby?' asked Margaret. 'I shouldn't think anybody as idiotic as that would be able to run a hotel.'

'A cheap and nasty boarding-house,' said Clothilde.

'You surely don't mean a brothel, Boob darling? Is Papa really suggesting that we take a holiday in a house of ill-repute?' asked Sebastian, who was often inclined to amuse himself by being as irritating to his parents as he could manage.

'Oh, shut up, Seb!' said his sister, giggling.

'But Mamma has just said—'

‘Be quiet! Be quiet!’ exclaimed his mother. ‘For heaven’s sake allow your father to finish what he has to say!’

‘It was what *you* had to say which intrigued me, darling. How do you mean—cheap and nasty? Nasty it may be, and probably is, but...’ Sebastian squinted at the list of tariffs which was printed on the end page of the brochure... ‘I wouldn’t call it cheap. Maggie and I could hitch-hike all over Europe for about a tenth of what’s put down here.’

‘Well, you are not going to,’ snapped Marius. ‘You are coming to the island of Great Skua.’

‘But why? I mean, why are you so keen we should stay with this aunt? With her reputation she can hardly be a fit hostess for my little sister.’

‘If you will abandon this flippant and tasteless line of talk and stop showing off in front of your mother, I will endeavour to explain,’ said Marius. ‘I referred a minute ago to the fact that your aunt is the owner of what must be a valuable and desirable property—’

‘No hawkers, no circulars, no touts,’ muttered Sebastian in his sister’s ear.

‘And this property must inevitably fall to another owner some day.’

‘Yes, to the fly-by-night,’ said Clothilde.

‘The illegitimate son has been adopted’, went on Marius, disregarding her, ‘and can have no claim on the estate. I regard it as my bounden duty, therefore, to allow nothing to stand in the way of a reconciliation with your aunt.’

‘Great expectations!’ muttered Sebastian. ‘Very well, Father,’ he said aloud, ‘I love to think that birds in their little nests agree. By all means let us suck up to Aunt Eliza if you think the pickings will be worth it. All those in favour?’

‘When did she have the baby?’ asked Margaret. ‘Was it a long time ago?’

‘Yes, my dear,’ replied Marius, ignoring his son. ‘It was quite a romantic story, I believe. It happened nearly thirty years ago.’

‘Long enough ago to be respectable, and therefore long enough ago to be uninteresting,’ said Sebastian. ‘That means the little intruder will be a man of early middle age by now.’

‘I am a man of early middle age,’ said Marius, who was forty-four. ‘Ransome would be something under thirty. In any case, whatever his age, he can be disregarded as a possible heir to his natural mother’s estate.’

‘I wish I were as sure of that as you seem to be,’ said Clothilde.

‘But what actually *happened*?’ asked Margaret. ‘I mean, how did she meet the father and why didn’t your family make him marry her, and all that sort of thing? I thought that, in *their* station of life, pressure was always brought to

bear.'

'In this case that was impossible,' said Marius stiffly. 'I regret to say that the father of the child was already married.'

'Well, couldn't they find some other poor daffy-down-dilly to take the rap?'

'Now really, Margaret!' protested Marius.

'See what dreadful ideas this sordid story has already put into my small sister's hitherto innocent head,' said Sebastian. 'So they had the baby adopted, did they?' he went on hastily, catching his father's eye. 'So that puts him out of the line of direct succession, does it?'

'If he was legally adopted, and *if* Eliza does not remember him in her will,' said Clothilde.

'Well, as I said before, I'm willing to take a chance,' said Sebastian. '“The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold”—although it seems as though Ransome's father was the wolf, doesn't it?'

'Yes, and you and *your* father are only the silly sheep who are going bleating to Great Skua to see what you can get, and that will be exactly nothing,' said Clothilde contemptuously. She turned her back on them, picked up a book and began to turn over the pages.

'I wouldn't mind spending a month at Aunt Eliza's hotel,' said Margaret, 'especially as it's on an island. It would make a change, if nothing else.'

'Well, my dear,' said Marius to his wife's back, 'it appears to be a majority decision, doesn't it? I will answer Eliza's letter as soon as we have dined and tell her that we accept with pleasure and are delighted with her suggestion that we should spend a holiday month with her at her hotel on Great Skua.'

'You three must please yourselves,' said Clothilde, 'or, rather, you must please yourself, Marius, and leave the children to please you. However, I consider that I am entitled to my own point of view on the matter of Eliza and her desert island.'

'Surely, surely, my dear,' agreed Marius soothingly. 'This family is not a dictatorship. I should never dream of attempting to persuade you to alter your opinions just to please me.'

'That is just as well, for I have not the smallest intention of altering them. I neither like nor approve of Eliza, nor can I imagine anything more boring than spending a month on her sea-girt little piece of rock and mud.'

'We shall all be there together, my love, and, as intelligent people, we can surely manage to entertain ourselves without *ennui* for a matter of four short weeks. Besides, if we pride ourselves on a democratic approach to family

matters, it seems to me that you have been out-voted and must perforce fall in with the wishes of the majority.'

'I do not feel myself bound in any such way, Marius,' said Clothilde, slamming her book down and turning to face him. 'I shall not go with you to Great Skua. The best I can do is to promise you a warm welcome and a substantial meal when you return from this unnecessary and ill-advised expedition. The good meal you will certainly need, I imagine, even if the welcome is supererogatory.'

'What have you got against Aunt Eliza, Boobie?' asked Sebastian, putting his long thin arm round her shoulders. 'Tell your devoted and most inquisitive son. Is there some ghoulish secret hidden in your heart concerning her? You can't dislike a woman simply because she has begotten a child without benefit of clergy, can you?—or can you?'

'You none of you know *what* I can do,' said Clothilde. 'I hope you will all enjoy your stay on Great Skua. That is all I can say.'

'Oh, now, really, my dear!' protested Marius.

'No,' said his wife. 'You go and toady to Eliza if you think fit, but I have not the smallest intention of going with you.'

CHAPTER TWO

Theory and Speculation

‘No tales of them their thirst can slake,
So much delight therein they take,
And some strange thing they fain would make,
Knew they the way to do them.’

Michael Drayton



So what was all that about?' asked Sebastian, when he and his sister were alone. 'Why is poor Boobie all stewed up? What's the idea of her outfacing The Tutor and repudiating Aunt Eliza's little island?'

'Do you think she means it?'

'About not going? Yes, I'm sure she does. No wonder The Tutor looked so flummoxed. I should think it's the first time she's ever flouted him.'

'Well, you can't really blame her, I suppose. She has pretty good reasons.'

'Because Aunt Eliza had a little fly-by-night all those years ago?'

'No—well, not only that.'

'What do you know, then, that I don't?'

'Nothing—well, not really anything, I suppose.'

Sebastian picked up a gramophone record and glanced at the label.

'Don't thwart me, you miserable child,' he said. 'Do you want me to smash up Clifford Curzon *and* the London Philharmonic?'

'You wouldn't, anyway. Put it down, and I'll tell you what I think. Mind, it is only what I think, not what I know.'

'How do you come to think anything?'

'It's only because of something I heard at the Singletons' last November. I'd forgotten all about it until now.'

'The Singletons? Not at that famous sherry party where I broke their crystal goblet to try to cover up for Boobie's fearful *gaffe*?'

'Well, how was she to know there was going to be that sudden ghastly silence just as she was talking to Vivian Spofforth about Tony Singleton's goings-on in the village?'

'She shouldn't have been talking about any such thing in the Singletons' own house. It was perfectly frightful of her. No wonder we've never been invited there again. However, never mind that now. What did you hear and how did you come to hear it?'

'Put this cushion across your bony knees, and let me sit on you. It's a nuisance we've only one armchair in here.'

'Put the cushion on the floor and sit on it there. Your place is at my feet, not in my lap. You're getting a big girl now.'

'But it's cold in here. I thought you could keep me warm.'

'Such thoughts are most unbecoming, my child. Besides, I want to stretch

my legs and I can't do that if you're sitting on them. What did you learn at the Singleton home about Aunt Eliza and her island?'

'Nothing, really, that you could call anything much, but I did get a hint or two which might explain Boobie's reactions.'

'The only hint *I* got at the Singletons' was that we were expected to leave before eight so that they could get the supper (dignified by the name of dinner) on the table.'

'Well, *we* call it dinner, so why shouldn't they? And what's the difference, when you come right down to it?'

'I never answer rhetorical questions. But come along! Your story. We haven't got all the evening.'

'Well...' Margaret flung the cushion on the floor, plumped herself down on it and rested her arms across her brother's long legs '... you know that downstairs cloakroom of theirs where we parked our things? I was in the little wash-place, sponging strawberry mousse off my frock, when Cousin Marie and that ghastly friend of hers came out with Barbara Singleton to get their coats because they were all going to the church concert. I don't think anybody had noticed me slip out except Barry Singleton, who'd spilt the mousse on me, the clumsy idiot, so I don't imagine they realised they could be overheard, especially by one of our family. Barbara said she didn't suppose it would affect the Lovelaines, even if they knew, and Cousin Marie said that of course Marius and Clothilde didn't know, and even if they came to hear of it later on she didn't think they would take in what it might *mean*, because they were so unworldly.'

'The Tutor didn't sound so very unworldly when he was plotting for us to ingratiate ourselves with Aunt Eliza in order to cut ourselves in for her worldly goods,' commented Sebastian. 'Never mind. Go on. This is rather interesting.'

'Cousin Marie said it seemed very peculiar to *her*, considering Eliza's previous lapse from respectability, and that she was glad to be on Clothilde's side of the family and so did not need to be mixed up in anything strange and rather (she was afraid) unsavoury. Then the ghastly friend said, all the same, wasn't it rather romantic, in its way, that after all these years Eliza had taken a partner? To that Cousin Marie said there were partners *and* partners, and that nothing had been said about Eliza getting married and that she felt pretty certain that nothing of the sort was contemplated.'

'How did Marie come to know anything about it?' asked Sebastian.

'I'm coming to that. Well, Barbara Singleton, who isn't a bad sort in spite of being a district visitor, said that business reasons could make any alliance

respectable, she supposed, so long as there was no jiggery-pokery, and that probably all Eliza had been after was a bit more capital. To this Cousin Marie said there were other ways of obtaining a bit more capital and that, for her part, she would sooner do without it than get it by some people's methods.'

'Cousin Marie,' said Sebastian, 'is a prize bitch, and always has been. I don't know why The Tutor ever has her to stay with us.'

'Well, she's Boobie's only living relative, that's why. Still, I do think she might come without that other creep.'

'Oh, The Tutor's too gullible for his own good. Cousin Marie told him that the blighted Potter woman is too nervous to be left alone in their cottage, so she has to tag along wherever Cousin Marie goes. That's why we have to put up with her as well as Cousin Marie.'

'Mary and the lamb. It's quite a common relationship, of course,' said Margaret.

'What on earth do you know about it?' asked Sebastian, amused. 'And take your pointed elbows off my legs. You're making dents in me. Go on about your eavesdropping.'

'It *wasn't* eavesdropping! There's a sort of grille at the top of that door, so I couldn't help hearing what was said, and I didn't like to emerge in the middle of their conversation, because it was obvious they hadn't a clue that anybody was near them.'

'Stop making excuses. I bet you stayed put with your ears flapping and forgot about the stain on your frock.'

'Well, of course, it *was* rather interesting in a way,' confessed Margaret, 'and *you* needn't put on airs. You're keen enough to hear what I've got to tell you.'

'*Touché, mademoiselle!* So now get on with it. One thing, though. This partnership is going to play havoc with The Tutor's little game. I can't think *we* stand any chance of coming in for Aunt Eliza's property later on. It seems to me more than a fifty-fifty chance that, even if she leaves nothing to this son of hers, the partner will take most of the pickings. He'll be no end of a fool if he doesn't. After all, he's the man on the spot. Anyway, was there more?'

'Yes, there was, and this, I think, is *most* peculiar.'

'Peculiar-strange or peculiar-nasty?'

'I don't know. Nothing was said straight out, but, unless I'm mistaken, Aunt Eliza's previous boy-friend *and* their son Ransome are also living on the island, and I'm absolutely certain that's a thing which The Tutor and Boobie don't know.'

‘Living on the island? Are you sure?’

‘Well, not absolutely sure, but Cousin Marie seemed pretty confident about it.’

‘How did she get hold of the dirt?’

‘Well, that’s just it. She and the Potter woman have been to the island and stayed at Aunt Eliza’s hotel. It seems they went there last summer, after the Potter saw Aunt Eliza’s advertisement in a newspaper and thought the island sounded “rather fun”. She *would*, wouldn’t she? So they talked it over and sent for the brochure and they went, not knowing until they got there that it was Aunt Eliza’s hotel.

‘“Of course, it was expensive for what we got,” Cousin Marie told Barbara Singleton, “but, although the meals were monotonous, the vegetables were fresh, and I must say Eliza, considering what a busy woman she is, made us very welcome.” Well, it turned out that the vegetables came from a smallholding and the dairy produce and eggs from a farm on the island and, according to what Cousin Marie was saying, the owner of the smallholding was the farmer’s son and Aunt Eliza had known the farmer for more than thirty years and the son since she was a girl of twenty. And’, concluded Margaret, ‘if that doesn’t ring a bell, nothing will ever make sense again.’

‘You go too fast,’ said Sebastian.

‘No, I don’t. It sticks out a mile. The farmer is Aunt Eliza’s old boy-friend and the smallholder is their son Ransome. I suppose the son couldn’t also be this partner she’s taken? If he is, a fat chance of The Tutor’s rather muddy little plans coming to anything, wouldn’t you say?’

‘It would delight me to think that you are right and that the farmer is Aunt Eliza’s boy-friend and that she’s taken Ransome into partnership, but I rather doubt it, you know. Did Marie and Potter meet the partner?’

‘Oh, no, he hadn’t taken over at that time. It was only in the air, so to speak.’

‘So how did Marie know it had come off?’

‘I expect she’s received this year’s brochure, the same as we have.’

‘I don’t remember reading anything in it about a partner. It said, *Eliza Chayleigh, Resident Proprietor*.’

‘No, there wasn’t anything, I’m sure. I expect, as they’d been there before, Aunt Eliza sent Cousin Marie and the Potter a covering letter. She must have mentioned the possibility of the partnership, though, while they were there.’

‘You began your story in the middle, as I suppose you realise. What brought up this matter of the partnership and our parents’ unworldliness?’

‘Well, you know, Seb, it didn’t occur to me at first to take in what Cousin Marie was saying. She’s a frightful gossip, anyway, so it was quite a long time before I really began to cotton on.’

‘Oh, yes? Well, and when you did?’

‘She said, “I don’t know what difference Eliza thought it might make to *me* whether she took a partner or not, but I must say she gave me a very straight look, almost like a challenge, when she mentioned the parents’ legacy. I’d always thought that the Lovelaines’ chances disappeared when Clothilde’s straight-laced mamma boycotted Eliza at Clothilde’s wedding and Clothilde followed suit and looked straight through the poor woman, but, after what Clothilde let out to me the last time Pottie and I were there, it almost sounds as though, *if* this partnership *should* turn out to be a marriage, the parents’ legacy goes up the spout.”’

‘What on earth did she mean by that?’

‘I’ve no idea, Seb, but it sounded to me as though Boobie, as usual, had let some cat out of the bag.’

‘The parents’ legacy? Whose parents?’

‘The Tutor’s and Aunt Eliza’s, I suppose. It sounded as though they might have left her some money.’

‘Cousin Marie could have made that up.’

‘*And* the statement that Aunt Eliza had known the boy since she was twenty?’

‘People like Cousin Marie can stretch dramatic licence a pretty long way, you know. I think we’ll wait and see, but, after what you’ve said, nothing on earth will keep me from spending a holiday on Aunt Eliza’s island.’

‘You don’t think I ought to tell The Tutor what I overheard and deduced?’

‘He’ll only wonder why you haven’t told him before.’

‘No, he won’t. Until today there has never been any thought of our going over to the island, so there would have been no point in telling him. He would just have thought I was tattling, wouldn’t he?’

‘True, my child, and for pity’s sake don’t worry about it now. I like a bit of clean fun, and this summer holiday begins to take on a charm which I never expected.’

‘I wonder whether The Tutor and Boobie know that Cousin Marie and the creep went over to the island last summer? It seems so strange they should hit on that particular spot,’ said Margaret. ‘It would be just like Cousin Marie not to tell anybody, of course. She loves her little secrets. I can’t help feeling there’s more

than that behind it though.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said Sebastian. 'Knowing what Boobie thinks of Aunt Eliza—we didn't until today, but apparently Cousin Marie did—I expect she thought she wouldn't be invited here again if it were known that she'd been hobnobbing with the busy *hôtelière* on the mystical island of Great Skua. Perhaps *she's* got her fishy eye on the main chance, too.'

'I wonder?' said Margaret. 'Well, we'd better get changed for dinner.'

'Supper,' said her brother, with a grin.

Far to the south, on the edge of the New Forest in a small square mansion just on the outskirts of the village of Wandles Parva, a tall, well-built, comely woman was talking to her husband.

'But it's not Dame B's cup of tea,' she was protesting. 'You can't ask her to do your police work for you.'

'I tell you, Laura,' countered Robert Ian Gavin, 'if we could think of anyone better we'd contact him or her, but we can't. Dame Beatrice is much our best bet. You see, we have nothing to go on but rumour, so a policeman going about and asking questions on a tiny island with a population of only two or three dozen people, would be suspected and rumbled in no time, everybody would shut up tight and we wouldn't get a solitary bleep out of any of them. Most of them are probably doing something illegal, anyway, and would shy like mustangs if they thought the law was involved.'

'That's a nice thing to say about a lot of innocent villagers!'

'They're not villagers and I'd take my oath they're not innocent. There's no such thing as a village on the island, nothing but a couple of lighthouses, a disused airfield, a farm, a hotel, a deserted quarry, a few farm-workers' cottages and a small pub. Another thing: the inhabitants are the descendants of wreckers and smugglers, don't you forget, and I don't suppose the Ethiopian has changed his skin all that much down the years. All we want is to put an observer there. Dame Beatrice won't have to *do* anything. We don't want to make a move until we can be sure we're on the right tack. We don't want anything put down in writing. As soon as she's got any worthwhile information, we want her to come back with it and give us a hint. Just a tip-off, that's all we need, but one from an absolutely reliable source. Then we shall know where we are.'

'I suppose you're in touch with the Home Office about all this?'

'Certainly we are. They are perfectly willing to loan Dame Beatrice to us, subject, of course, to her own approval. They can't exactly order her about.'

'I should hope not, indeed! She's not their servant, *and* she's a consultant

psychiatrist, not a coppers' nark.'

'Look here, Laura, if there *is* anything fishy going on, don't you think that, at a time like this, we ought to go all out to stop it? Lives are being sacrificed and property reduced to rubble. Surely you realise that?'

'Dame B. is too old to go chasing about on perilous seas to faery lands forlorn to do your dirty work for you.'

'She's not so old that she's lost the use of her brains and her powers of observation. There won't *be* any chasing about. All we want her to do—'

'Besides, she's busy writing her memoirs.'

'And in what better place than on an island where nobody knows her, where there are no interruptions from lion-hunters, where she'll live four hundred feet above sea-level in one of the healthiest spots on earth... ?'

'And where the only food, I suppose, will be mutton and potatoes, and where the Atlantic winds blow at gale force all day and all night.'

'Well, if you're going with her, and I hope you are, you'll think you're in your beloved Hebrides, so what's wrong with that?'

'Well, you can *ask* her, I suppose,' said Laura reluctantly, 'but, mind, no argument if she turns you down.'

'Fair enough. No argument. We've found a decent house for you to live in, by the way. Taken it for three months from the beginning of July.'

'The devil you have! You think of everything, don't you?'

'We do our best,' said Gavin modestly.

One evening, when June was in its second week, Marius Lovelaine, with a deprecating cough, said, in a tentative tone, 'I cannot think you mean it, Clothilde.'

'Mean what?'

'Well, we have always gone on holiday together.'

'Nonsense. The children went away on their own last year *and* the year before.'

'I meant you and I, my dear.'

'Then it is more than time we made a change. Oh, Marius, why on earth do you want to see Eliza? It would be much better to ignore her letter completely. You can never revive the past. Besides, if she really wanted to make friends with you again, she would have extended an open invitation, not expected you to pay your way at top rates. It's simply a try-on because her rat-infested little lodging-house is half-empty.'

'I have given you my reasons, my dear. My salary is sufficient for our needs,

but not for anything more. The children are a great expense, as you know, in spite of grants and so forth, and I shall have nothing whatever to leave them—or you, either, if I should chance to pre-decease you.’

‘Your life is insured in my favour.’

‘Most inadequately, my dear, with money at its present value and with the way things are tending. But let us not talk about that. What I want to discuss—’

‘Is this proposed holiday on Eliza’s island, I suppose, but *I* do *not* want to discuss it. My mind is firmly made up. I shall take a little holiday on my own, I expect. I will not even wait to see the rest of you on your way. I shall leave about ten days before you do, I think, Marius. I cannot bear the idea of your going cap in hand to your sister because you think (and against all reason, at that!) she may have something to leave you.’

‘It is not against all reason, Clothilde, as you would know perfectly well if you stopped to think. When Lizzie quarrelled with my parents, they turned her out of the house as soon as she was fit again after Ransome’s birth, but my father settled a sum of money on her to be held in trust until she married. He and my mother were horrified at what she had done and, as there was no possibility of the child’s father being in a position to marry her unless his wife died, they thought the prospect of a dowry might attract a suitor.’

‘But apparently it has not done so. Does Eliza benefit in any way from the money?’

‘You know she does not. She gets nothing while she remains single, and at her present age there seems little likelihood of her marriage.’

‘So what are you trying to tell me?’

‘That, at her death, the money—and it must have amounted to something substantial by this time—comes to me. You know all this already.’

‘Then why attempt to curry favour with Eliza if you are to benefit, in any case, from her death?’

‘It is *because* I am to benefit, Clothilde. You may be sure that Lizzie knows of this provision and it goes against the grain with me that we should have been at odds with one another, and, I think, because of it. If only we could link up again as brother and sister, I would feel that I was *entitled* to what she had to leave. As it is—’

‘Oh, you are too pure-minded to live! What utter nonsense! No, really, these are scruples gone mad! It is not as though you haven’t done all you could and, in my opinion, more than you ought, for Eliza, since you inherited your father’s estate. Surely you are entitled to anything you can get from her when she goes?’

‘I shall feel happier when we are friends again, Clothilde. That’s why I’m so thankful that she herself has made the first move towards a reconciliation.’

‘Tchah!’ said Clothilde. ‘Well, I do not intend to be here when you go. I should be too angry. I think I shall go to my cousin for a bit. I imagine you will have no objection to that?’

‘To Marie? Good heavens above!’

‘I have no other cousin, and it will not hurt her to put me up—free of charge, incidentally!—in return for her visits here with her hanger-on. I do not propose to remain here for a month on my own while you and the children go off on this scavenging expedition to Great Skua. And, talking of that, I may have fish of my own to fry.’

‘Is that a threat, my dear?’

‘No, neither is it a warning.’ Her wintry expression softened. ‘I only hope we shall both obtain what we want, that’s all, so no hard feelings, Marius.’

CHAPTER THREE

Rooms and Views

‘The homely house that harbours quiet rest,
The cottage that affords no pride nor care,
The mean that ’grees with country music best...’

Robert Greene



Two weeks later a long train journey, a rough crossing and a small open boat which smelt strongly of stale fish, brought Marius and his children, on a Wednesday afternoon, to a long wooden jetty which projected beyond the discoloured sands of the beach. Behind the beach rose bare and formidable cliffs up which, as Marius noted without enthusiasm, there climbed in steepish gradients an unmade track-like road. There was only one consolation. He had been informed by his sister, when she answered his letter of acceptance, that there would be portage for suitcases if those were left on a wooden platform at the foot of the cliffs.

The island was called Great Skua because of a theory, not particularly borne out by fact, that from the mainland it resembled in shape and general colouring that predatory piratical sea-bird. As Sebastian had surmised, it was nothing more than a vast piece of granite rock, although a faulting of slate had made the landing-place possible, but the island, to the tired and sea-tossed visitors, looked about as welcoming as a prison.

The steamer from which the passengers, with some difficulty, had been transferred to the odoriferous landing craft, was to proceed further up the mainland coast, but, with Marius, Sebastian and Margaret, five other passengers had been disembarked on to the end of Great Skua's primitive jetty. One of these was in uniform and was the relief keeper of the island's north-west lighthouse; two (an older and a younger man whose ages appeared to be in the region of sixty and thirty respectively) appeared to be indigenous to the place; and of the remaining couple one was a very thin, small, elderly woman with sharp black eyes, yellow claw-like hands and a beaky little mouth. This she pursed up in silent condemnation of the scenery before turning to speak to her companion.

This companion was a far more striking figure, a Valkyrie of heroic proportions, tall, ruddy of countenance, handsome, vigorous, and apparently more favourably impressed by her surroundings than were the rest of the visitors. When the passengers were landed, she carried, with jaunty ease, two heavy suitcases to which were strapped waterproofs, a shooting stick and two hook-handled ashplants. She had a camera slung over one shoulder and a leather-strapped handbag on the other, and she tramped triumphantly across the heavy, dingy sand of the beach like William the Conqueror invading England. She dumped the suitcases on to a wooden platform similar to that provided in

country districts for the reception of milk-churns and, with her small, elderly but energetic companion, began to climb the steep cliff-path.

Marius, carrying his own two suitcases, and Sebastian carrying his own and his sister's and with a rucksack on his back, followed more slowly across the sands and, having dumped everything except Margaret's camera and handbag (the only impediments her solicitous brother had allowed her to carry) the Lovelaines began to toil up the cliff-road in the wake of the two women. These had detached the two ashplants from their baggage and were making good use of them as aids to the ascent of the hill.

'Wish *we'd* thought of walking-sticks,' said Sebastian. 'Do you know that old lady, Father? I had an impression, when we were on the steamer, that you thought you did.'

'I know her by sight and reputation,' Marius replied. 'I have attended some of her lectures. She is Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, consultant psychiatrist to the Home Office and a criminologist of note.'

'Who's the Amazon with her? Not her daughter, surely?'

'She has no daughter, so far as I am aware. Her son is Sir Ferdinand Lestrangle, the well-known Queen's Counsel. The younger woman is probably either a travelling companion or her secretary.'

'She'd make a pretty efficient body-guard, too,' said Sebastian. 'Gosh! What a pace they're setting up this confounded hill! It's enough to kill the old lady.'

'It's the old lady who seems to be setting the pace,' said Margaret. 'I suppose, like us, they are bound for Aunt Eliza's.'

'As it is the only hotel on the island, I think there is no doubt of that,' said Marius. 'I look forward to some interesting conversations with Dame Beatrice.'

That this aspiration was not to be realised was soon made clear. The cliff road ended in a flight of roughly-hewn steps and, at the top of these, two paths diverged from one another. The small map which formed the two centre pages of Eliza's brochure indicated that the right-hand path was the one to follow in order to reach the hotel. The left-hand fork dipped to a deep hollow in which a solid, square house faced the sea which could be seen from its upstairs windows. Towards this building the two women were directing their vigorous way. Marius and his children took the right-hand path at the end of which they could see a jumble of buildings, one very much higher and larger than the rest, which they rightly took to be Eliza's hotel and its satellite bungalows.

'Well, Aunt Eliza's brochure is right about one thing,' said Sebastian. 'There will certainly be a view of the sea from most, if not all, of the windows.'

They mounted three wide steps and turned to look at the view. The mainland, shadowed by a sea-haze, was remote and dreamlike. Between it and the island the sea was broken by small white-capped waves and the travellers had been more than aware of the wind as they climbed the hill. From where they were standing there was no hint of the beach, neither could they see the wide, shallow arc of the bay. Even the square mansion towards which their fellow-travellers had turned was almost out of sight, half-hidden away in its dip.

Without a word Marius turned and pushed open the revolving door of the hotel. Already he felt that it had been a mistake to come. He marched up to the reception desk and gave his name. It was met with a cool stare.

‘Mr. Lovelaine, did you say?’

‘Yes. I’ve booked for a four-week stay. My sister is expecting me. Miss-er-Mrs Chayleigh is my sister.’

The reception clerk turned up a ledger, grudgingly, it seemed, then turned the hotel register round towards Marius.

‘You had better sign the book, then,’ she said. ‘Numbers seven, eleven and twelve seem to be vacant. Did you need the porter? He’s off duty.’

‘No,’ replied Marius. ‘We left our luggage down below.’

The receptionist hooked down three keys and pushed them over the counter.

‘Afternoon tea, if you require it,’ she said, ‘is served at four and is paid for on the spot.’

‘I see.’ Marius turned to his son and daughter who were now inside the vestibule. ‘We had better inspect the three rooms,’ he said, ‘and then we can apportion them. I suppose you’d both like tea?’

‘No. You have some,’ said Sebastian, ‘and suit yourself about the rooms. Maggie and I are going to have a look at the island.’

‘Oh, very well,’ agreed Marius, whom this arrangement suited. He turned to the receptionist. ‘Perhaps you will let my sister know that I am here,’ he said. He picked up the keys. ‘Is there a lift?’

‘No. Room seven is on the first floor. Rooms eleven and twelve are in one of the chalets.’

‘But that is most inconvenient. I expected that we should all have rooms in the house.’

‘Not possible. The chalet is very comfortable.’

Marius went up the stairs to inspect room number seven and found it greatly to his liking. He supposed he had better offer it to his daughter in the hope that she would refuse it, but he abandoned this thought when he had crossed the short

space between the house and the chalets and had looked at the one to which he held the keys. It was of wood and consisted of two very small bedrooms, each of which opened on to the outside air and had an inside door which connected it with a small sitting-room. There was no water laid on, but a notice boldly displayed in each bedroom announced that the bathhouse and toilets were housed in a separate building labelled *All Yours* which was readily accessible to chalet-based visitors.

Apart from all other considerations, this, and a fire-extinguisher which occupied a prominent place on the wall of the tiny sitting-room, decided Marius. It was not for him to put up with such inconvenient arrangements. He was prepared to make a fuss with the reception clerk if his children repudiated the chalet, but first of all he would point out to them the advantages of the situation, stressing the privacy the chalet afforded and the delightful privilege of having their own sitting-room, besides the freedom to come and go exactly as they pleased.

He returned to the hotel, mounted to number seven, washed his hands (thus, apart from anything else, establishing his right to the room) and went downstairs to greet his sister and have some tea. He expected her to offer it in her sitting-room. This would naturally result in his taking a welcome cup of tea without being charged for it. He resented being charged separately for this extraneous little meal when he was paying full board at what (he now agreed with his wife) were unreasonably high prices for what was offered.

Meanwhile Sebastian and Margaret were carrying out their tour of reconnaissance, but were confining it to the immediate environs of the hotel. These, they soon decided, offered little prospect of entertainment ‘unless’, said Margaret, ‘there’s anybody interesting living in that house down there in the dip, apart from the old witch and the Amazon. I don’t think *they’re* our cup of tea, do you?’

They stood on the cliff-top and studied the house. Except for a vast, ancient wistaria which climbed all over the front of the south wing, it was without adornment. One window in the centre block had been bricked up, otherwise the fenestration was plain, Georgian and practical. All the upstairs windows were open at top and bottom, indicating that the inhabitants had a liking for fresh air, but, apart from this, the house had the un-lived-in appearance of a place which was rented for the summer.

It was sheltered by a hill of bracken and heather which rose behind it like a wall, but up which a winding path led to the plateau which formed the main floor

of the island. In front of the house there were bushes, but, except for a small rose-garden, no attempt at cultivation of any kind had been made. A low stone wall separated the rose-garden from some rough grass and the shrubbery, and to the east of the main building were outhouses and stables. Behind these were the quarries, now overgrown and unused.

As the brother and sister were taking in these details, the Amazonian woman, whom they had followed with her older companion up the steep track from the landing-stage, came out of the front door of the house and saw them. She waved to them and then disappeared round the side of the building and the next they saw of her was on the winding path at the back which led either to the quarries or the plateau on which the hotel was situated.

‘Wonder what she’s like?’ said Margaret.

‘A bit above my weight, anyhow,’ said Sebastian, watching the tall woman striding onwards up the slope.

‘And a bit above both our ages. Do you think she lives there?’

‘No. They had luggage with them.’

‘They might be coming home from holiday. I wonder when *our* luggage will come up? I could bear to get out of these clothes and into something a bit more in keeping with the scenery. I wonder whether The Tutor has contacted Aunt Eliza yet?’

‘Perhaps we had better go back and find out. Besides, I’d like to see our rooms.’

They returned to the hotel to find that their father was just beginning his tea, which he had had to pay for.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it hasn’t taken you long to make your tour of inspection. What do you think of it all?’

‘We don’t know yet. We haven’t been far,’ replied his son. ‘Has the luggage come up? I can’t walk about this sort of countryside in these sort of clothes and shoes. How many people are staying here? What are the rooms like?’

‘There seems to be nobody about. As for the rooms, only one of us is to be in the house, it seems. The other two are to occupy one of the chalets. I will just finish this cup of tea and then I will show you the chalet which has been allotted to us.’

‘If there’s nobody much staying here, why can’t we all have bedrooms in the house? A fine thing if it rains and we have to tramp across here for breakfast,’ said Sebastian.

‘I know. Well, come along and see how you feel about things. If we think the

chalet is quite unsuitable, I shall make a complaint to Eliza.'

'Have you had a talk with her?'

'No,' said Marius, frowning with annoyance, 'I have not. I know she is a very busy person, but I would have thought she would have been on the spot to greet us. She must know when the boat gets in. I consider it most remiss of her. What is more, I shall complain about the reception I got at the desk. *Most* off-hand, I thought.'

'By the way,' said Sebastian, 'did Aunt Eliza ever acknowledge your letter in which you told her we were coming?'

'Oh, yes. She said she was very pleased and looked forward to our stay.'

'Then perhaps she isn't in. I shouldn't think she *can* be, if you still haven't seen her,' said Margaret.

'The receptionist could have told me that, one would think. I will enquire.' He marched off to the desk.

'It's a bit off of Aunt Eliza, isn't it?' said Margaret. 'I mean, it was at her suggestion that we came here. I know there was a family row—'

'That was years ago. Besides, you gathered that the row was between her and Boobie. That's why Boobie wouldn't come with us, I expect, and wouldn't even wait to see us off.'

Marius returned to them with a happier expression on his lantern-jawed, scholarly face.

'The mystery begins to resolve itself,' he said, 'so shall we go and take a look at the chalet?'

'I didn't know there was a mystery,' said Sebastian.

'Oh, I meant that there has been no sign of Lizzie and that we have been given only one room in the house itself. It appears that Lizzie is away from the island on business, and Miss Crimp is finalising the arrangements for accommodating a conference of naturalists. She expects forty of them and, as many are elderly, she wants to put those in the house and allocate the chalets to the younger guests. It seems reasonable enough to me.'

'How long is she expected to be away?'

'The staff do not know, but I have found out that the receptionist is a person of importance. It seems that she is your aunt's partner.'

'Her partner?' said Sebastian. He caught his sister's eye, and both began to laugh.

'I see no particular occasion for mirth,' said Marius. 'Has the sea-air gone to your heads? The woman's name is Crimp and she is in sole and complete charge

of the establishment until your aunt returns.'

'We're laughing because, from something Cousin Marie said at the Singletons' when she and Miss Potter were staying with us in November, father, we sort of gathered that Aunt Eliza had appointed a second-in-command, but Cousin Marie seemed to think it was a major-domo, a man,' said Margaret, controlling her mirth. Marius frowned.

'I don't see that Marie could know anything about it,' he said.

'Oh, but she and Miss Potter stayed here for a week or so last summer, father.'

'I didn't know that!'

'Oh, dear! I supposed she would have told you and mother, or I would have mentioned it, but, of course, it didn't interest me much because I had no idea at the time that we ourselves would be coming.'

'No, no, of course you hadn't, my dear. Extraordinary that Marie didn't mention it to your mother or me, though.'

'I expect she didn't like to, knowing what mother thought about Aunt Eliza.'

'That might be it, I suppose, but Marie has always been rather secretive. What did she think of the hotel?'

'Not much, I believe. She said the meals were monotonous.'

'Well, they should not be that, considering the price one is paying. Was Miss Crimp in partnership with Lizzie last summer, then?'

'We have no idea, Father,' said Sebastian, before his sister could answer the question.

'I do not remember seeing her name on the brochure,' said Marius, 'but perhaps she and Lizzie have some agreement about that. A partner? I am not at all sure that I would have come had I known. I cannot think why you did not mention it, Margaret, before I made my booking.'

'I'm very sorry, Father. I couldn't see that it mattered. It doesn't really make much difference, does it?'

'Of course it makes a difference! Sebastian can see that, even if a schoolgirl cannot.'

'Can you, Seb?' asked Margaret, with an air of innocence. She resented being called a schoolgirl.

'Yes. Bang goes our reason for coming here,' said Sebastian, 'and, for once in her innocent life, Boobie hasn't boobed. She said it was N.B.G. and that seems to be just about right.'

'Well,' said Marius, 'that is putting it too strongly, but the partnership does,

indeed, complicate matters. I shall make it my business to find out exactly how it stands. It is more than likely that Miss Crimp has exaggerated the importance of her position here. Underlings are often inclined to puff themselves up when their masters are absent. From what I know of Lizzie, I should think it most unlikely that she has parted with more than a very small share of her holdings. It would be quite out of character if she has given much away.'

The family of three walked over to the chalet and Marius produced the keys.

'Hm!' said Sebastian. 'Not bad. The front faces the sea and we are on the leeward side of the island. There's a fairly firm table in the sitting-room where I can get on with my work if I feel so inclined or the weather turns wet, and the beds appear to be reasonably well sprung. I think I could settle in here quite well for a month. I suppose you'd prefer to stay up at the house, Father?'

'I must leave that to Margaret,' said Marius, 'but I must confess that I've already used one of the towels in the bedroom there.'

'Oh, I'll share with Seb,' said Margaret, 'but I'm not having any truck with public bath-houses and the rest of it. I shall take my bath up at the house, Father, and you'll have to get out of your bedroom while I change in it.'

Marius thought this reasonable, and said so. They returned to the house just as the suitcases were brought to the hotel by horse and cart. As the luggage was unloaded they claimed their own, and the two pieces which were left were trundled off to a destination which was indicated on the labels as *Puffins*. As the name which Sebastian read on one of the suitcases was Bradley, he assumed, rightly, that *Puffins* was the house which he and his sister had recently noted. The other suitcase was labelled Gavin, and with it on the cart and similarly labelled was a small packing-case which, to his knowledgeable eye, seemed likely to contain books. He eyed it speculatively and wondered whether a little borrowing might prove possible if the books were interesting. Even if they proved to be what, in his youthful arrogance and intellectual snobbishness, he wrote off as trash, they might come in useful on a wet day when he did not feel like getting on with his work or when he felt disposed to idle away a sunny afternoon on the cliff-top or among the heather.

There seemed to be nobody to deal with the luggage, so he picked up his own and his sister's suitcase, dumped them on the verandah of the chalet and went back to accompany the others to the bedroom which was now definitely assigned to Marius.

'So this is your room, Father,' said Margaret, glancing around it. 'It's quite a good one, but I'd rather stick to the chalet, and I'm not at all sorry Aunt Eliza is

not here to greet us. We shall be thoroughly acclimatised by the time she comes back. There's nothing like being the man on the spot. What time do you want us to come along for dinner, Father?'

'There will be nothing much to do after dinner,' said Marius, 'so we may as well have it later rather than sooner. I think perhaps eight o'clock will be a suitable hour. I shall turn in early. It has been a fatiguing day.'

'Disappointing, too, for the poor old buster,' said Sebastian. 'This partnership business has hit him where it hurts. He can say what he likes about underlings, but I wouldn't be surprised if that rather poisonous little female at the desk holds pretty good cards and knows most of the answers.'

'I do wish now that I'd told him about the partnership,' said Margaret.

'Well, we know why you didn't, and I still think you were right. Having known about it since November, you couldn't suddenly spring it on him at the end of April. If he wants to scheme for Aunt Eliza's money, that's his affair and it isn't your fault. He's been hoist with his own petard, so let's leave it at that.'

CHAPTER FOUR

Lizzie's Island

‘And in their courses make that round
In meadows and in marshes found.
Of them so called the Fairy Ground,
Of which they have the keeping.’

Michael Drayton



The landing-beach at which the boat had put in stretched northwards for upwards of a mile. Surveying it from the cliff-top on the following morning, Sebastian, who had a towel round his neck and his swim-trunks on under his flannel trousers, remarked to his sister, who was similarly clad except that she wore a bikini top under her sweater, that he was not impressed by the facilities which the greyish shore afforded.

‘I don’t think I want to bathe here,’ he said ‘and then there’s that awful grind up the hill to get back. My legs always feel like jelly after I’ve been swimming.’

‘Well, let’s walk about a bit,’ suggested Margaret. ‘Breakfast isn’t until eight. We’ve heaps of time.’ They walked to the tip of the island. From there, the mainland, which at first had been discernable through the early morning haze, was out of sight and all that faced the holiday-makers was a vast expanse of sea. They rounded a headland, glanced back at the south-east lighthouse of the island and then found themselves looking down on a tiny cove. ‘That might do,’ Margaret went on. ‘Let’s find a way down.’

‘It still looks rather mucky,’ objected Sebastian. ‘I hate bathing from shale and pebbles. Besides, the sea looks pretty rough and there are rocks.’

‘There’s somebody swimming, anyway.’

The descent to the beach was precipitous, but there were steps cuts here and there, and at the back of the cove they found a large cave with a rocky ledge on which were the clothes presumably belonging to the swimmer. They shed their own outer lendings and picked their way painfully over sharp pebbles and precariously over bright-green slippery rocks to get into the water. It was shallow and clear, except for dark strands of seaweed, and it struck cold at that hour of the morning. Margaret crouched in the shallow sea on what appeared to be a shelf of rock and then, using her hands, lifted herself sufficiently to be able to propel her body forwards towards the dark green billows. The rocky shelf ended with some abruptness, and she found herself submerged in six feet of water. She surfaced and began to swim. Sebastian followed suit and the next moment they were hailed by the other swimmer, who came threshing towards them on a clean, crisp stroke which made their own quite adequate efforts look puerile and clumsy.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Just thought I’d better tip you off to stay pretty well inshore. Out there is the race they call Dead Man’s Day. Once you get caught in

that, you've had it.' She turned and threshed away. Five minutes later she was on the rocky shelf and was wading purposefully towards the cave.

'That's *her*,' said Margaret, floating and allowing the waves to carry her slightly shorewards.

'That's who?' asked Sebastian, pushing the long hair away from his eyes.

'The woman we saw yesterday. Gavin. She waved to us from outside that house.'

'Wonder how long she'll take to dress? I shall soon have had enough of this. It's damn' cold and I want my breakfast.'

'Oh, dear, yes, it is cold, isn't it?'

'Well, there's nothing to stop *you* going ashore. I'll have to wait until she's through, though, I suppose.' He turned and swam along level with the coast, mindful of the warning about Dead Man's Day. Margaret watched his somewhat laboured stroke and contrasted it with the human torpedo who had come in to speak to them, then she turned in the direction of the shore, swam as fast as she could, hoisted herself on to the ledge and staggered ungracefully over stones towards the cave.

The woman, who seemed to be as energetic out of the water as in it, was just pulling a sweater on over a towelling shirt. Having done this, she unconcernedly dried her magnificent legs, shook back her damp hair, which appeared to have received a vigorous preliminary rubbing, and said, as she pulled on her trousers,

'Hope you didn't mind my butting in.'

'Of course not. Very good of you, although my brother and I are pretty careful in strange waters.'

'Good for you. Staying here long?'

'A month. Your name—my brother spotted it on your luggage...'

'Gavin. Laura to my friends.'

'Our name is Lovelaine. I'm Margaret, my brother is Sebastian. We're staying here with my father. The hotel belongs to my aunt.'

'Oh, yes? Well, I hope I'll see you again.' She pulled on a pair of rope-soled shoes and added, 'Wouldn't your brother like to dress now? I'm just off.'

'Yes, I expect he's feeling cold,' said Margaret. 'I'll signal him.' She stepped out of the cave and waved and beckoned. Sebastian thankfully waded ashore, but, when he reached his sister, he said,

'Oh, dear! I thought you meant the cave would be vacant, but she's still in there, isn't she?'

'I'll get your towel,' said Margaret. 'You can begin to dry yourself out here.'

‘This wind is chilly. Why did you wave if she isn’t ready?’

‘She said she was.’ Margaret went into the cave. There was no sign of Laura. She and the wet swimsuit which she had flung down were both gone. Bewildered, the girl returned to her brother. ‘The cave’s all yours,’ she said. ‘Laura Gavin seems to have done a disappearing trick. Hurry up and get dressed. I want my breakfast.’

‘She can’t have disappeared,’ said Sebastian. ‘She certainly didn’t leave the cave while I was coming out of the water. I’d have seen her.’

‘I suppose you would. Anyway, she isn’t in there now.’

Sebastian entered the cave, dried himself and dressed and then said, ‘I think I’ve got it. This cave must have been a smugglers’ hole. That means there’s another way up to the top of the cliffs from the back of it. I’ve heard of such things before. There must be a natural fault in the rock. Let’s find it.’

This proved to be a simple operation. Not only was there a natural fissure in the back of the cave, but rough steps had been chopped out to make a steep ascent and a short cut to the cliff-top.’

‘Fun!’ said Sebastian. ‘But I don’t think I’ll bathe before breakfast another time. I got damn’ cold hanging about waiting to get into the cave.’

‘Well, you don’t need to bother about me. You never do. I’ll tell you what. I saw some steps up to the lighthouse while I was in the water. Let’s go that way back.’

‘Worse than the climb up from the cave, wouldn’t it be?’

‘I don’t know, but I like steps.’

‘And what happens when we get to the lighthouse? Ten to one we’ll have to come all the way down again.’

‘Oh, well, all right, then. I’ll do it by myself sometime.’ They toiled up the rest of the slope, flung their wet swim-suits down on the sitting-room floor of the chalet and found their father already at breakfast when they went over to the hotel.

‘Good morning,’ he said. ‘Have you been swimming? I hope you didn’t take any risks. I’ve been talking to the porter. He has come back on duty today. He tells me that the currents around the island are very treacherous and can be extremely dangerous.’

‘Yes, we know,’ said Margaret. ‘The Gavin woman—Laura—was there, and she warned us about Dead Man’s Day.’

‘That was very good of her. Well, sit down and have your breakfast. The bacon and eggs come from the farm and are excellent.’

‘Any news of Aunt Eliza?’ asked Sebastian.

‘None. I could hardly ask the porter about her, and so far there is nobody in charge of reception. I think you may like to make yourselves scarce as soon as you have had your breakfast. The hotel is already in a state of near-confusion preparing for a vast influx of visitors, so that it promises little hope of any peace and quiet this morning.’

‘Oh, the bird-watchers’ conference, I suppose,’ said Sebastian. ‘Maggie and I will be out of it, anyway. We’re going to explore the island. Do you think, Father, that we could ask for a packed lunch? If there’s going to be a sort of spring-cleaning done here, I want no part of it.’

‘I should have liked to come with you, but I think I will stay here to greet Lizzie upon her arrival. I did ask the porter about steamers and it appears that one is due today, but not another one until Saturday. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays are the arrival days, and as the conference people are expected to come by the Saturday boat, your aunt will certainly not delay her own arrival until then. I confidently expect her this morning at about half-past eleven or so. It appears that the Thursday boat puts in earlier than ours did yesterday.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Margaret, ‘perhaps we had better come back to lunch, then, if Aunt Eliza is expected.’

‘There is no need for you to put yourselves out, my dear. In fact, it is so long since I saw my sister that I believe I would prefer to break the ice before I introduce you to her.’

‘Thank goodness for that!’ said Sebastian, when they had left the hotel and were making their way towards the northwest corner of the island. ‘We didn’t want *him* tagging along and making us look at what interests him and bores us crosseyed. He has such weird ideas of enjoyment.’

‘Poor old Tutor! Do you sometimes think perhaps we’re a bit lousy where he’s concerned?’

‘Good heavens, no! He’s got a job he likes and isn’t much good at (so he’s lucky to keep it, and he wouldn’t, except at a university), *we* don’t cost him much and he’s stingy about my allowance, anyway, and I don’t drink (much) or dope at all, and we’re both quite reasonably intelligent—and that’s a miracle when you think of Boob. Besides—’

‘Oh, not that ancient Sicilian Vesper about not having asked to be born! I’m jolly glad I *was* born, and I’m going to enjoy myself as long as I can manage to stay alive. Look, there’s the church. Shall we take a look at it?’ said Margaret.

Sebastian took a look at it and snorted disgustedly.

‘Victorian Gothic,’ he said.

‘Well, John Betjeman *likes* Victorian Gothic, and he’s the Poet Laureate now, so don’t be snobby.’

Sebastian tried the door, but the church was locked.

‘Oh, well, that’s that, and I don’t think we’ve missed much,’ he said.

‘I wonder whether there are any interesting old grave-stones in the churchyard,’ said Margaret.

‘There couldn’t be. I should think the building was put up in about 1880, and not a day earlier.’

‘There might be an amusing inscription or so, all the same. Come on, let’s look around. We’ve time to kill.’

‘Not if we’re going to get as far as the northern end of the island.’

‘Well, we need not do that today. We’ve got a whole month to mess about in.’

Sebastian gave way and tagged along after her as she inspected the graves. The churchyard was ragged and untidy and on three of the headstones vandals had been at work. Red paint had been splashed on them in the forms, respectively, of a giant letter s followed by the word MURDER, a five-pointed star labelled LUCIFER and a sprawling, badly-executed swastika.

‘Amateur satanists!’ said Sebastian. ‘Cor!’

There was one more item of interest. A notice in the church porch, addressed to visitors, supplied the information that services were held once a month, but that special arrangements could be made with J. Dimbleton at Lighthouse Cottage by any who wished at any time to go to church on the mainland. TARIFF BY MUTUAL AGREEMENT DEPENDING ON NUMBERS, the notice stated.

‘Might come in useful, even if one *didn’t* want to go to church on the mainland,’ said Sebastian. ‘Sundays are bound to be pretty grim in a place like this. Oh, well, let’s press on, shall we? There’s only one track in this direction, so there’s no need to argue about which way we should go.’

The track brought them to a farm and continued past it. The farmhouse was perched high up on the plateau in what seemed to be an unnecessarily exposed position and adjoining it were piggeries, cattle-sheds, a walled kitchen garden and a good-sized cottage and smallholding. Apart from the buildings and the rough road which hereabouts was muddy with the tramlings of cattle and plentifully endowed with large pats of cow-dung, there was nothing to be seen but pasture dotted freely with the black and white of Fresian cattle and also a number of white-faced Herefords which were quietly grazing.

As they approached the cottage a man came out. He gave them a polite good-day as they passed, and as soon as they were out of earshot Margaret remarked,

‘He was on the boat that brought us ashore. I was certain he and the older man with him were natives. He might be able to tell us quite a lot about the island.’

‘What I’d like him to tell us,’ said Sebastian, ‘is whether the island supports a pub. We have sandwiches, but nothing to drink.’

‘They did offer us a thermos flask of coffee at the hotel.’

‘I know, but it’s such a drag hauling drinks about.’ He turned, ran, and caught up with the man, who had turned towards the farmhouse. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘but is there a pub within measurable distance? My sister and I could do with a drink.’

‘A drink? Oh, sure. I could do with one myself. It’s this way, if you’d like to come along. You’ll be visitors to the island, no doubt.’

‘Yes, we came over yesterday. Didn’t we see you on the boat?’ asked Sebastian.

‘Me and my dad, yes, I expect you did. We were on it, anyway.’

‘There were two other people, two women.’

‘That’s right. Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley and her secretary, Mrs Gavin.’

‘Is Dame Beatrice really a criminologist?’ asked Margaret.

‘Shouldn’t think so, except that she’s a psychiatrist. It might come to the same thing, I suppose.’

‘Does she come here often?’

‘Never been before, to my knowledge.’

‘But you know all about her.’

‘Well, she’s famous, I believe. Writing her memoirs, so I hear, and has taken *Puffins* for three months to get away from her friends and relatives. A gaggle of servants came over last week to get the house ready.’

‘To get it ready?’

‘Well, yes. The family left when the other house was turned into a hotel. It’s been up for sale for years. The agents let it when they can, but that’s not often.’

‘We wondered,’ said Margaret, falling into step beside him while Sebastian loitered behind, ‘whether our Aunt Eliza —Mrs Chayleigh—was expected back this morning.’

‘Expected back? Back from where?’

‘I don’t know exactly. From the mainland, anyhow. We were told she had

gone over to make arrangements.'

'For what?'

'Well, isn't she expecting to have a bevy of bird-watchers at the hotel?'

'Goodness knows! Is she?'

'So we were told. That's why Seb and I have to sleep in one of the chalets. She couldn't let us have rooms in the house because of all these ornithologist people.'

'I know nothing whatever about it. I never go up to the hotel. It will be nice for my mother to have it full, I should think. It doesn't usually do too well, I believe.'

'Oh, doesn't it?' said Margaret, concealing her interest in what she had just learned.

'No, not really at all too well. Even in August it never seems anything like full. I know a bit about it, you see, because we supply her with farm and garden stuff, so according to the orders she sends down we can always tell roughly how many guests she has.'

'I should think, then... ' Margaret hesitated before completing her sentence.

'What should you think?'

'Oh, well, I only meant that I should think you'd get bumper orders for your produce next week, when all these people turn up. I believe forty of them are expected. Of course, we should never have come if my father had known that the hotel was going to be crowded out, but I expect it will be a very profitable thing for Aunt Eliza.'

'Oh, well, that's no business of mine. As for our produce, well, my father lets her have it at bargain prices, so it won't be at all to our advantage to let her have enough for forty people. We've a built-up market on the mainland, you see, where the prices are very much better. How many people are already staying at the hotel?'

'I don't really know. There were only five other people at dinner last night, apart from the woman at the reception desk who had a table to herself just inside the service door, and there were only two others at breakfast this morning.'

'That's what I mean. The place is never more than one-fifth full, I would say.'

The track they were following dipped to a little, fast-running river and a bridge. Near the bridge and high above the river-gorge was the pub. It was a slate-roofed, long, low building covered with white-washed rough-cast and it had a stone wall along one side of its yard with a gap in it to give access to a

small building of quarried stone which was half woodshed and half earth-closet.

Right across the front of the pub itself there was a long board between the downstairs and upstairs windows which bore in very large letters executed by an unpractised hand the information that the building was the Great Skua tavern and general stores. There were two front doors, one leading into the bar and the other into the shop. Sebastian pushed open the former and held it for the others.

‘Expect we’re too early for drinks,’ he said. ‘It’s only a quarter past ten.’

‘No, that’s all right,’ said the man. ‘No nonsense like permitted hours on Great Skua. Now, then, sit down. What will you have? Not that there’s any real choice. It’s beer or whisky and there won’t be any ice for the whisky, so it’s no good asking for Scotch on the rocks, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, beer for me,’ said Sebastian, ‘and a lemonade shandy, if they can do one, for my sister.’ When they had finished their drinks, he added, ‘My round now. Same again for everybody?’

‘Not for me, thanks,’ said the man. ‘Got to be getting back. Glad to have met you. Why don’t you drop in at the farm some time? Come and have some tea. Any relations of Eliza Chayleigh are welcome. She used to be called Eliza Lovelaine until she inherited old Miss Chayleigh’s property. The old lady made her change her name as a condition of being made the heiress.’

‘Well!’ said Margaret to her brother as they took their way north-westward again. ‘What do you make of that!’

‘Make of what?’ asked Sebastian. ‘What on earth made him give us an invitation to tea at the farm? It would be frightful. I don’t know the first thing about pigs and mangold-wurzels.’

‘Oh, Seb, don’t you know what that man is? That must be his reason for inviting us. He knew us when we mentioned Aunt Eliza.’

‘Oh, Lord! Not Ransome?’

‘I’m sure of it. There’s the smallholding and the farm, and he said that the older man on the boat with him was his father and he spoke of Aunt Eliza as his mother. I’m dying to know more about him.’

‘Why on earth?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, except that I liked him. Didn’t you?’

‘I didn’t have much to do with him. He seemed all right, but he talked mostly to you.’

‘I wonder what he really thinks of his life?’

‘Goodness knows, and I couldn’t be less interested.’

‘Well, where do you think he fits in? And how do you think he reacts to Aunt

Eliza? He said he never goes up to the hotel.'

'That could mean anything or nothing. Aunt Eliza must be kept pretty busy and I expect this chap is busy, too, if he runs that big kitchen garden which goes with the cottage and helps the farmer as well.'

'He seems fairly well-educated, doesn't he?'

'I should think he went to an agricultural college and then she let him have the cottage and the smallholding. She'd feel bound to do something for him, and the farmer would, if he's his father, you know.'

'It might come as a big jolt to The Tutor to find that Aunt Eliza seems to have taken enough interest in him to have him trained and to find him a job on the island. I wish we knew more about it all. Are we going to tell The Tutor we've met him?'

'Yes, but not that you like him. We must mention the meeting itself because he may find out about it for himself if we don't and that might prove embarrassing.'

'Do we go down and watch the boat come in? I'd like to get a first sight of Aunt Eliza.'

'We shouldn't know which person *was* Aunt Eliza. Besides, I'm not going to sweat down and up that cliff road again today. What about those sandwiches?'

'If we eat them now we'll be hungry before we get back to the hotel.'

'I'm hungry now,' said Sebastian. 'There is a mass of granite rock sticking up there ahead of us. Let's find a flat bit and sit and stodge. We can then get another drink at the pub on our way back.'

'Aren't we going to explore the rest of the island?'

'Yes, when we are refreshed and "Richard is himself again". It's going to be hot this afternoon, though.'

The rest of the trackway skirted a small disused airfield and led out to the north-west lighthouse. Here, in spite of the warmth of the afternoon, the wind was strong, so that, instead of following a cliff path which, they could see, would take them southwards along the rocky coast which formed the west side of the island, they skirted its tip and took the more sheltered but very rough path on the east cliff, stopping here and there to rest. The turf was close, dry and springy and the day was hot. The east cliffs were high and steep, but were less formidable than those on the Atlantic side of the island, and the path they were following dipped occasionally into boggy hollows. One or two small streams made their way down to the sea, but were summer-thin and easily forded and their waterfalls were pleasant but not spectacular.

The brother and sister talked little and were often apart as one or the other found something of interest in the dips and hollows or scrambled up a goat-track among the bracken to reach a view-point which disclosed a stretch of the coast.

Sebastian found what he thought were some primitive hut-circles. Margaret gathered wild flowers. Both stopped to watch sea-birds and saw what they thought must be seals lying out among the flat rocks.

Beyond the little streams the path rose again, but soon descended to, and wandered across, a large and beautiful combe which ran down to the sea. This they explored, and found another small beach with a cave which penetrated far into the cliff.

They marked it for future exploration and then re-traced their steps, since there was no way round the next headland from the shore. When they regained their cliff path they soon found a deviation from it which led across to the farm, the buildings of which stood out prominently on the grassy plateau.

‘We don’t want the farm or that chap again,’ said Sebastian. ‘Let’s go this way.’ Another deviation, almost overgrown with bracken, led up to a hillock on which was perched another lighthouse, but this was an eighteenth century building long out of use. Sebastian, who tried it (tentatively at first then more determinedly), found the door in the surrounding wall had been made fast.

‘It probably isn’t very safe, anyway,’ he said, surveying the structure over the top of the wall which, by taking advantage of his height, he found himself able to do. He was peering over when a thickset, middle-aged man came up to watch him.

‘You don’t want to bother with that there,’ he said. ‘No admittance. That’s a very dangerous building. Try one on’t’ other side the island. Just as good. *Safe*, too. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Best keep away from here.’

‘Thanks. We couldn’t climb over, anyway,’ said Sebastian. The man nodded and walked off in the direction of the farm. ‘That’s the bloke who was on the little boat when we came over,’ he added to his sister. They returned to their path, but Margaret looked back once or twice at the lighthouse.

‘There’s that other old one on the other side of the island,’ she said. ‘I spotted it when we came out of the pub. He mentioned it, didn’t he? They might even open it up to the bird-watchers. There must be thousands of sea-birds on those western cliffs, and from the lamp-room gallery there ought to be very good views of the rest of the island.’

‘Oh, well, we’ll certainly mark it for future reference if we find we can get inside the tower, but I expect that’s locked up, too,’ said Sebastian. ‘If they’ve

had to build the two new ones, these ancient structures may never be opened to the public. By the way, I wonder what The Tutor has done with himself all day?’

‘Written to Boobie, I expect, or found himself some sheltered spot in which to read and snooze. Oh, no, he won’t, though, because surely Aunt Eliza is back by now?’

CHAPTER FIVE

The Missing Hostess

‘Plover, partridge, for your dinner,
And a capon for the sinner,
You shall find ready when you’re up,
And your horse shall have his sup:
Welcome, welcome, shall fly round,
And I shall smile, though under ground.’

John Fletcher



Sebastian reclaimed the keys which he had handed in when he and his sister had left the hotel, and they went to have tea in the lounge before he unlocked the chalet so that they could change for dinner. They were too leg-weary to have any desire to go out again, and, as the hour for tea was almost over when they ordered theirs, it was turned half-past five before Sebastian, with a sweater under his dressing-gown, went off to the bathhouse and Margaret, fully clothed but carrying sponge-bag, towel and toilet accessories, knocked at her father’s bedroom door.

Marius was reading, but, in response to his child’s plea that she needed his room, he agreed to remove himself after requesting her not to dawdle.

‘And what we’re to do about baths and what not, when all these bird-watchers arrive, I don’t care to think,’ he said. ‘If I’d realised that Lizzie meant to crowd out the hotel with people sleeping three to a room, I would never have come.’

‘Have you seen Aunt Eliza, Father?’

‘No, I have not. I went down to meet the boat, but she was not on it. Half-a-dozen people were landed, but your aunt was not among them.’

‘Did you say anything at the desk?—ask after her, I mean?’

‘No. Miss Crimp was busy, and it did not seem worth my while to hang about until she was at liberty.’

Margaret went down to him in the lounge when she had had her bath to inform him that his room was now at his own disposal, and added,

‘There’s nobody wanting anything at the desk now. Shall I speak to Miss

Crimp about Aunt Eliza?’

‘No. You go and get ready for dinner. I will speak to Miss Crimp myself.’

He found the receptionist worried.

‘I can’t think what’s keeping her, Mr Lovelaine,’ she said. ‘I quite thought she would have been on yesterday’s boat and, when she was not, I was certain she would turn up today. There is no boat now until Saturday morning, and that is much too late for her to see to things. All these naturalists will be on the steamer, and the boat will be plying back and forth all the morning to bring them off. They will be arriving here half-a-dozen or more at a time, a perpetual influx, and all having to be assigned to their rooms and chalets, and their luggage to be seen to, and all the rest of it, apart from our having the upset of turning the lounge into a conference room for them. Thank goodness all the camp beds and extra chairs were brought over last Saturday, so *that’s* done with. They’ll have to do their own arranging and put up the extra beds themselves, I’m afraid. The staff can’t be expected to see to everything. Of course we’ve had to reduce our usual charges because they’ve been told to bring sleeping-bags and also because they insisted upon making a group booking at an inclusive charge, which does cut our profits and I can’t think why Eliza agreed to it.’

‘But why do you think my sister is delaying her return? Is there any reason that you know of?’

‘I really cannot think of any, Mr Lovelaine. There was no suggestion that she intended to stay over there longer than usual. And now, if you don’t mind, I have a whole heap of things to see to. There is only tomorrow to get everything done, so I’m sure you will excuse me.’

‘Oh, yes, of course. How long are these naturalist people staying?—I feel bound to point out that the number of bathrooms is limited !’

‘A week, ten days, a fortnight, and one party will stay even longer. We are expecting to get rid of the camp beds on Saturday week, but that is the most we can hope for.’

‘I see. Well, I shall look forward to this Saturday’s boatloads in one respect at least.’

‘More than I shall, Mr Lovelaine, I can assure you!’

‘To see my sister, I mean.’ Marius went off to the room his daughter had vacated and later joined his children at dinner. ‘Your aunt must now be expected on Saturday,’ he said. ‘In view of the influx which is then anticipated, I have a very good mind to meet the boat when it comes in, greet Lizzie (but not warmly) and take the boat back to the mainland. Having invited us here, I think the least

she could do was to be here to greet us. I feel put out, decidedly put out. Besides, these bird-watchers will swarm everywhere. There will be no peace for anybody. I am informed at the desk that some of them may be staying for an indefinite time. It is most annoying and provoking of Lizzie not to have told us about them, and most inconsiderate, too.'

'Perhaps she thinks we haven't shown *her* all that much consideration,' said Sebastian, 'not communicating with her or going anywhere near her, I mean. As for the bird-watchers, Father, I expect they'll only haunt the rocks and the cliffs. Besides, some of them may even break their necks with their scrambling about. You never know your luck.' He caught his sister's eye and slightly shook his head. She understood him. It was not the time to mention Ransome.

The next day, Friday, was passed by the brother and sister in bathing and sun-bathing between breakfast and lunch, and by taking a windy walk directly after lunch along the west cliffs. The cliff path gave them views of a series of steep escarpments with knife-edge headlands enclosing small inlets. Up these inlets the sea leapt, tossed and foamed, assaulting a succession of black rocks, luridly streaked with bright-green, poisonous-looking seaweed, which lay like sea-monsters dangerously lurking inshore.

'Grand, but off-putting,' yelled Sebastian, his voice almost shouted down by the wind. 'Let's shelter behind that tor.'

Winds and storms had weathered the granite to a vast bare crag in whose lee some cattle were sheltering.

'Oh, cows!' exclaimed Margaret, backing away.

'They won't hurt you.'

'I don't like them at such close quarters. What's the time?'

'Nearly four.'

'Well, we ought to be getting along to the farm for tea.'

'You don't really mean to take up with that, do you?'

'We were invited and I think we could just drop in. I wouldn't mind meeting Cousin Ransome again.'

'Cousin... ? Oh, well, I suppose he is.'

There was no clear path to the farm from where they were. They could see the roofs of its buildings, however, for the island at this point was barely half a mile wide, so they made their way by following tracks through the bracken and soon arrived at the door of the cottage from which Ransome had emerged on the previous occasion.

He opened the door as soon as they knocked. They received the impression

that he had been waiting for them. He had shaved and was neatly dressed in dark grey flannel trousers, a blue shirt open at the neck, and a heather-mixture tweed jacket.

‘I reckon I’m going to disappoint you,’ he said. ‘Connie Crimp sent for Dad and he’s had to go over to the mainland and he’s taken Lucy with him, so I can give you some tea up at the house, but I can’t introduce you to them. How did you leave things at the hotel?’

‘In rather a muddle,’ said Margaret, as they entered the farmhouse. ‘Aunt Eliza still hasn’t come back from the mainland and we’re threatened with a full-scale invasion of birdwatchers on Saturday. Oh, you know about that, of course. I think we told you.’

‘Dad and Lucy have taken the trip in Dimbleton’s little boat. They’re going across to round up my mam and tell her to get her business cleared up and get back on tomorrow’s steamer, so I knew she wouldn’t have been on today’s boat. I reckon Connie Crimp *is* in a bit of a taking.’

‘Yes, Miss Crimp is in the hell of a flap,’ said Sebastian. ‘Does Aunt Eliza usually go off on these jaunts and leave her to cope?’

‘Oh, you wouldn’t call them jaunts,’ said Ransome seriously. ‘There’s a lot of business to see to on the mainland. We haven’t a bank or a doctor on the island, that’s for one thing. Nor have we any newspapers, except when the boat comes in. Then there’s all the wholesale stuff. I told you what my dad, from the farm, and I, from my holding, can supply, but that doesn’t begin to add up to all that’s needed to run that hotel. Strikes me she didn’t know what she was letting herself in for when she took it on. Then the servants. Always changing, they are. Don’t like being stuck out here with only one pub and no cinema. Dull it is, and those who aren’t daft are devils.’

‘We passed some cottages,’ said Margaret.

‘Ah, yes, you would, coming this way from the hotel, but they’re only for farm-workers. Our men, well, they’re born and bred on the island, though, even then, the young ones hop it as soon as ever they can. When Dad goes, the farm will go, I reckon, because there won’t be anyone left to work it. The young fellows won’t stay, and I certainly couldn’t manage single-handed.’

‘How would you like to manage the hotel?’ asked Margaret, hoping this would be answered as though it was a different and an even more personal question. Ransome laughed.

‘I reckon Connie Crimp has her eye on the management of that,’ he said, ‘and I wish her joy of it. It wouldn’t be my cup of tea. I’d sooner own a lunatic

asylum than try to run a hotel.'

'You could always sell it, if it were yours,' said Sebastian.

'No chance of that, not with all that's owing on it, if all that you hear is true.'

'Owing on it? Is it mortgaged, then?' asked Sebastian.

'Oh, no, it isn't mortgaged—not yet. It's all the improvements, you see. Dad says not half of them have begun to be paid for.'

'Well, let's hope the naturalists will sub up handsomely,' said Margaret.

'Thanks ever so much for the tea, Cousin Ransome.'

'You must come again,' he said, 'when Dad and Lucy are at home. Lucy is Dad's wife, by the way.'

'I suppose,' said Margaret, when they were on their way back, 'we'd better stay in the hotel tomorrow with The Tutor. He'll expect us to be on hand to greet Aunt Eliza when she lands. Have you got your party piece ready? I do think she's behaved a bit coolly, don't you? I wonder what she's really like.'

They were not to know. The Saturday boat came in and went out to the steamer again. It repeated this manoeuvre half-a-dozen times from ten in the morning onwards. Marius and his children waited on the cliff-top as the boat continued to land the bird-watchers, but Eliza did not appear. When it ceased its ferrying and the steamer was lost to sight round a headland, the three returned to the hotel.

'We must somehow have missed her,' said Marius, 'although, even after all these years, I would have thought I'd recognise her and she me.'

They found a peevish Miss Crimp behind the desk.

'There's only one explanation that I can think of,' she said. 'Eliza must have gone straight to the farm to make sure of the eggs, milk and butter. She must realise how pressed I am and thinks she had better take something off my hands, I suppose, however late in the day.'

'Surely somebody else could have gone to the farm,' said Marius, answering her peevish tone with his own. 'I should have thought her first consideration would have been to greet her own brother and his children.'

'Consideration?' snorted Miss Crimp, her colour high and her nostrils pinched. 'Eliza Chayleigh doesn't know the meaning of that word. Oh, and I'm afraid Miss Lovelaine won't be able to take any more baths in the house. I noticed she has been bringing her things over here since you arrived. I have far too many guests in the place already. I cannot have the chalet people taking bathrooms which the residents require. There is a perfectly adequate bath-house for chalet visitors.'

‘Now about this bathroom nonsense!’ said Marius testily. ‘I am paying full rates and I insist upon all the facilities of the hotel being open to my daughter.’

‘I am sorry, Mr Lovelaine—’

‘Otherwise I cancel my booking immediately.’

‘Oh, it’s all right, Father,’ said Margaret. ‘I can manage, and we can’t get back to the mainland until Wednesday, anyhow. By that time things will begin to straighten out.’

‘If I had realised that you two were to be relegated to an annexe,’ fumed Marius, leading his children towards the lounge, ‘I would never have come. The whole set-up is most unsatisfactory, and what your mother would have made of the arrangements I do not know.’

‘Just as well she didn’t come, then,’ said Sebastian. ‘We had rather an interesting time this afternoon, Father. We had tea at the farm.’

‘Oh, do they provide teas? Was there clotted cream? I have seen no sign of any at the hotel, so, as we have to pay separately for teas, anyhow, which I regard as an unwarranted extortion, we may as well go over to the farm in future. What sort of price did they charge you?’

‘Oh, I don’t think they provide teas in that sort of way,’ said Sebastian. ‘We received an invitation. Did you know, Father, that the farmer is the man who got Aunt Eliza—I mean the man who was responsible for Ransome?’

‘Did you meet him?’

‘No, we didn’t. It was Ransome who invited us. The farmer and his wife had gone over to the mainland.’

‘To tell Aunt Eliza to hurry back to the hotel and help Miss Crimp to cope,’ explained Margaret.

‘I am sorry you had any contact with Ransome.’

‘We didn’t mean to,’ said Margaret quickly. ‘It was just that we ran into him on Thursday when we were passing the farm.’

‘Nevertheless, it was unfortunate.’

‘I don’t see why. Once this holiday is over I don’t suppose we shall ever see or speak to him again.’

‘One thing,’ said Sebastian, ‘Aunt Eliza can’t hold anything against the farmer if she buys his produce and if Ransome supplies the hotel vegetables. Do you think, Father, that she’ll leave the hotel to Ransome in her will?’

‘The hotel is not hers to dispose of,’ said Marius testily, ‘not entirely, that is. I wish I had known of this partnership before I answered Lizzie’s letter and booked our rooms. It upsets everything.’

‘I’ve said I’m sorry, Father,’ said Margaret.

‘Oh, quite, quite, my dear. I shall not refer to it again. It is unfortunate that I committed myself without knowing the facts, that is all. No blame attaches to you. We should never have come here. Your mother was right. I can see that now. And, Margaret, there is *no* reason why you should not make use of my bedroom and the adjacent bathroom. I will not be dictated to by that acidulated woman behind the desk. Who does she think she is?’

‘Aunt Eliza’s partner,’ said Sebastian.

‘We have only her word for that. She would scarcely be a full partner, anyway. I daresay she has bought herself a few shares and is trading on the fact. I shall be very glad to meet Lizzie and see that upstart person put in her place.’

‘I don’t really mind about the bath, father,’ insisted Margaret. ‘I don’t want a fuss. It isn’t worth it. Let’s talk it over with Aunt Eliza tonight and let her settle it.’

‘Very well,’ agreed Marius, who was not anxious to try conclusions with Miss Crimp until he was sure of his ground. ‘Well, I will see you at table.’

This promise was fulfilled, but enquiry at the desk beforehand produced no news of Lizzie.

‘Would she stay for dinner at the farm, do you suppose?’ asked Sebastian, as they began their meal.

‘Goodness knows!’ his father irritably responded. ‘I certainly feel in no mood to meet her tonight. I cannot understand her. Having invited us here, she might at least have had the decency to be on view when we arrived. I hope it is not a deliberate slight.’

‘Did you have a *very* bad row with her, father?’ Margaret enquired.

‘No, of course not. It was for my parents to dictate my course of action, for I was only a youth at the time of Lizzie’s foolishness.’

‘But something happened after that, didn’t it?’ said Sebastian. ‘Wasn’t there a row of some sort at your wedding?’

‘I expect it was Boobie,’ muttered Margaret. ‘Boobie and Grandmamma between them.’

‘What’s that?’ demanded Marius. ‘Have you been listening to Cousin Marie’s gossip? I should never have had that woman in the house!’

‘Well, yes, she did let out a few spiteful things at the Singletons’, Father.’

‘I have never quarrelled with your aunt,’ said Marius stiffly. ‘She was invited to the wedding and she came. Mischief was made between us by the behaviour of your grandmother, your mother’s mother. Lizzie never forgave it and until I

received this invitation that we should spend a holiday on Great Skua, she and I have never corresponded.'

'But you knew she had inherited the hotel.'

'I heard about it through my lawyers. As you may or may not know, my parents left all that they had to me, cutting off poor Lizzie completely. I arranged, therefore, that a certain sum—small, of course, for I had you children and your mother to think of—should be paid quarterly to my sister. When Lizzie inherited this eccentric Miss Chayleigh's estate on Great Skua my lawyers informed me of the fact and hinted, in dry and delicate lawyers' fashion, that it would be quite reasonable for me to discontinue the quarterly payments once Lizzie was amply provided for.'

'And did you? I hope you didn't,' said Margaret. Marius smiled.

'No, I did not,' he said. 'Your mother thought I should and, most illogically, held it against Lizzie that I instructed the lawyers to continue payment.'

'Good for you, Father. After all, your parents were Aunt Eliza's parents, too. It was a shame to cut her out of their will.'

'So I believed, and so I still believe, my dear, although provision was made for her if ever she married. All the same, if *this* is the return I get for a disinterested action, I begin to have second thoughts upon the matter. It is most ungracious and uncivil of Lizzie to delay our meeting like this. I do not understand it. Her letter of invitation was warm and friendly enough.'

'We understood from Ransome that the hotel does not do very well, Father. In fact, he told us that Aunt Eliza is in debt. The improvements seem to have cost more than she had to spend.'

'I would not rely on *that* source for your information, my dear.'

'Well, he lives on the island. He ought to know.'

'Perhaps it is not in his interests to represent the hotel as a going concern,' said Marius.

CHAPTER SIX

First Misgivings

‘Where has thou been so long from my embraces,
Poor pitied exile? Tell me, did thy graces
Fly discontented hence, and for a time
Did rather choose to bless another clime?’

Robert Herrick



Well, I cannot understand it,’ said Marius at the reception desk on the following morning. ‘I really cannot. What on earth is keeping her so long? Of course, Miss Crimp, you know far more about my sister nowadays than I do, but, from what I remember of Lizzie, she was not inconsiderate or ill-mannered, and, really, this absence of hers, when she had specifically invited me, seems in the worst of taste, to say the least of it.’

‘Come into my office, Mr Lovelaine,’ said Miss Crimp, showing her teeth in what might be taken for a smile. ‘It is better not to discuss the matter in public, and these intrusive naturalists are everywhere.’

‘Well, we’ll be seeing you, Father,’ said Margaret. ‘We’re going down to bathe.’

‘Be careful, then, and make sure the tide is not going out,’ said Marius. He passed through the flap which Miss Crimp opened for him and followed her to the back of the reception office to a smaller room where the floor-space was mostly taken up by a large desk and an armchair.

‘Please sit down,’ she said, indicating the armchair and herself taking the swivel chair with which the desk was furnished.

‘Mr Lovelaine, I am deeply concerned that Eliza should absent herself like this if she was really expecting you.’

‘What do you mean—really expecting us? She invited us, as I told you, and asked us to put in a month here.’

‘Yes. Have you her letter with you?’

‘Of course I have not. I merely accepted her offer of accommodation (and at the price she suggested) and threw her letter into the waste-paper basket, so far

as I remember. I saw no occasion to keep it, once the arrangements were made.'

'You say you accepted her offer? By letter, do you mean?'

'Certainly by letter. How else? She wrote again and confirmed my booking.'

'I suppose you have not brought that letter with you, either?'

'Miss Crimp, I do not understand you. Your tone is, to say the least of it, strange.'

'Well, Mr Lovelaine, I have to tell you that I searched our files after your unexpected arrival, and I can find no trace of this correspondence.'

'No trace of it? But why should there be any trace of it? Lizzie probably threw away my letter just as I threw away hers. The only letters one keeps, surely, are receipted bills and other such business correspondence.'

'But this *was* business correspondence, Mr Lovelaine. I say nothing about Eliza's first letter to you. That would probably have had no carbon copy attached, as it would have been a private matter, no doubt. But the acceptance you say you wrote should have been filed, since it contained evidence of a definite booking of rooms for a definite date and period, and there should also be a record of Eliza's second letter in which you say she confirmed the date of your booking. Eliza is not only a busy woman, as anybody who owns a hotel must necessarily be, but she is also a businesslike one, and she would certainly have filed such a letter.'

'Are you suggesting that the correspondence exists only in my imagination, Miss Crimp?'

'Oh, certainly *not*, Mr Lovelaine. Of course I meant nothing of *that* kind!'

'Then what, exactly, is the purport of your remarks?'

'May I be quite frank?'

'That question usually emanates from someone who intends to be rather rude,' said Marius, with an uneasy smile.

'Oh, no, not at all. At least, I *hope* you won't think me rude, Mr Lovelaine. I am wondering, quite simply, what made you decide to come here at all. I must believe, since you say it is so, that Eliza invited you, but why did you accept the invitation?'

'That is hardly your business, Miss Crimp. However, as you ask the question, you shall have an answer. I was pleased and relieved to hear from Lizzie again after all these years. I was not much more than a child when she left home as a result of a quarrel with our parents and became companion to this eccentric Miss Chayleigh, and the next I heard was that Miss Chayleigh had died and had left her this house and a good deal of money. My parents were dead by

that time and it fell to me to examine my father's effects. Among them I found a triumphant, spiteful letter from Lizzie (and I do not blame her for writing as she did, because I think my parents had really treated her very badly in causing her to have to turn out and fend for herself) in which she informed him of her good fortune, said that she was going into the hotel business and listed the improvements she was going to make. I wrote to inform her that our parents were dead, congratulated her on her inheritance and, of course, headed the letter with my own address. This was ten years ago.'

'And she did not write back to you?'

'Oh, yes, she acknowledged the letter, but in no very friendly spirit, and I heard nothing more until, round about Easter of this year, I received the letter and brochure which seem to be the main subject of this conversation.'

'And she actually suggested that you should come here?'

'She did, and in quite warm terms.'

'Then what has happened to the correspondence? I was told nothing about your booking, neither (as I told you) has Eliza entered it up. All I can think is that she never received your letter of acceptance.'

'But she must have done! She confirmed it, I tell you,' said Marius, pardonably exasperated. 'She wrote back at once and said that she would be delighted to see me and the children, and that she was sorry my wife could not come with us.'

'Oh, well, that's it, then. But what on earth is keeping her on the mainland? She knew all these naturalists had booked in. She *must* realise that I cannot be expected to cope *alone* with such an influx.'

'One would think so. Oh, well, I suppose she will have to leave it now until Wednesday.'

'Not necessarily. It would not be a difficult passage for a local boatman to make, and we have a working arrangement with Dimbleton.'

'I see. Well, Miss Crimp, I cannot feel that this has been a very satisfactory conversation. My children and I will be prepared to stay until Wednesday morning, but, if Lizzie has not returned by then, I feel we have no reason to prolong our stay.'

'Oh, but, Mr Lovelaine, you have made a firm booking for four weeks!'

'The evidence for which, on your own showing, does not exist.'

'But I have allocated rooms to you! I have had to refuse other applications!'

'You cannot have it both ways, Miss Crimp,' said Marius, returning with her to the outer office. 'We must both hope that Lizzie will be here by Wednesday, if

not before. My only reason for coming here was to see her. If she is not to be seen, well, I shall have carried out my part of the bargain. The rest is up to her.'

'Tell me, Mr Sebastian,' said Miss Crimp, when Sebastian claimed the key of his chalet, 'does your father *really* intend to cancel his booking if your aunt does not arrive here by the Wednesday boat?'

'First I've heard of it,' said Sebastian.

'Well, I have had a conversation with him this morning, and such appears to be his intention. I must point out to you that I need definite assurance as to whether he is or is not staying on. I have already refused applications for accommodation and if his room and your chalet are to be vacated I need to be informed.'

'Yes, of course, but it's no business of mine. You don't expect me to open the subject with him, do you?' Sebastian stared aggressively at a woman whom, from the outset, he had decided he did not like.

'I thought, perhaps, over luncheon,' said Miss Crimp uncertainly, somewhat taken aback by this unexpected attitude in so young a man, 'you could possibly —'

'Then you must think again, mustn't you?' said Sebastian, smiling unpleasantly at her. At lunch, however, he took it upon himself to broach the subject.

'What's this bee in the bonnet Connie Crimp seems to have got hold of, Father?' he asked.

'Oh, yes, of course, her name is Constance,' said his father, 'but is it quite the thing—?'

'For me to call her by it? Well, of course, I don't, to her face. But what is all this about our leaving on Wednesday if Aunt Eliza doesn't show up?'

'Well, I should have thought the situation was obvious. We came here to see your aunt. If she does not choose to make herself available to us, I see no point in extending an expensive holiday.'

'Oh, dear! Just as Maggie and I were beginning to enjoy ourselves so much!'

'You really like it here?'

'Oh, yes, Father,' said Margaret eagerly. 'We *do* like it here. We like it very much indeed, and we haven't explored a quarter of the island yet.'

'Oh, well, if you like it so much...'

'Even supposing *you* decided to leave, father,' said Sebastian, striking while the iron was hot, 'couldn't Maggie and I stay? It will give us the peace and quiet we need to do some holiday reading, and the fact that we've got a chalet will

give us the privacy we must have.'

'Well,' said Marius, 'that is all very well, but, for my own part, I feel I must make a gesture. It is most remiss of your aunt to absent herself for a whole week of our stay when, in the first place, we should never have come had it not been for her letter. She *asked* us to come, and now she deserts us in this extraordinary way.'

'A bit of a score for Boobie if we slink back with *that* sort of tale,' said Sebastian. 'Anyway, you won't take any steps until Wednesday, will you?'

'Not unless I decide to hire a boat privately at no doubt an extortionate charge. No, we shall be here until the Wednesday passengers are landed. If your aunt is not among them, we return by that or by Thursday's vessel. I trust that you will have explored the rest of the island by then.'

'And if we haven't?'

'Time to think of that when the time comes, my boy.'

'If Aunt Eliza is not on the Wednesday boat, I should imagine you'll begin to feel a bit worried about her, Father, won't you?' said Margaret.

'Worried?' said Marius, as though the idea was a strange one. 'Why should I be worried? She surely will return by the Wednesday boat. If not, there will be a letter. If neither, then I think we shall be fully justified in returning home, booking or no booking. Besides,' he added, 'if your aunt had been taken ill or had met with an accident, Miss Crimp would most certainly have been informed by now. Worried?' He examined the thought and then dismissed it. 'Oh, nonsense! There is nothing to worry about.'

'She may have repented of her offer of the olive branch,' said Sebastian, 'and be depending on you to do as you have threatened. It seems she's only got to lie low long enough if she wants to send us packing.'

'There is no reason to suppose that she has changed her mind, my boy. If she had, she would have written to me long ago. However, we will allow Wednesday to decide the issue for us.'

'One thing we could find out, if you like, Father,' said Sebastian. 'When we were over at the farm on Friday the farmer and his wife weren't there. Ransome told us that Miss Crimp had sent them over to the mainland to remind Aunt Eliza about the army of bird-watchers and tell her to get back on yesterday's boat, whatever happened.'

'Oh, really? They do not seem to have carried out their commission, then.'

'Would you care to have us go over to the farm and question them, Father?' asked Margaret.

‘Good heavens, no! As I said before, if your aunt had met with any mishap, we should have been informed by now.’

‘I wonder how long she usually stays away on these jaunts?’ said Sebastian. An enquiry at the desk elucidated this point.

‘A week and a half at the most, and I only remember that happening once before,’ Miss Crimp replied. ‘On that occasion she had to go to London to see her solicitors and took the opportunity of doing some personal shopping and going to a theatre and so forth. But at that time the hotel was very quiet and she knew that I could cope. This is rather different. Of course I suppose I can hold the fort if I must, but I still think she is being most selfish and inconsiderate. She should have been back long before this.’

For the first time Marius looked concerned as well as indignant.

‘I suppose nothing can have happened to her?’ he said doubtfully.

‘We should have been notified. She had documents in her handbag which would prove her identity if she had met with an accident. Of course she did not want the trouble of accommodating all these naturalists, any more than I did, but she said it would have been foolish to turn away their money. And now she goes off like this and leaves me to manage. I think it is too bad of her!’

‘We heard the hotel was in debt,’ murmured Sebastian, who had accompanied his father to the desk. Miss Crimp caught the murmured words.

‘In debt?’ she said, indignantly. ‘Who has been spreading lies of that sort? The hotel is flourishing.’

‘Well, last night’s fish wasn’t,’ said Sebastian coolly. ‘It hadn’t flourished for quite some considerable time.’

This statement had the most extraordinary effect on Miss Crimp. Her pale eyes widened and she opened and closed her mouth as though she herself was one of the fish in question.

‘You must complain to the head-waiter,’ she said, recovering.

‘I did, and received two very tired pilchards in exchange.’

‘I was saying,’ said Miss Crimp, ignoring Sebastian and again addressing his father, ‘that, if anything had happened to Eliza, I should have heard.’

‘What report did you receive from the people at the farm?’

‘What people at what farm?’

‘I understood that you had asked them to cross to the mainland last Friday and tell Eliza to hurry back.’

‘Oh, that? You have the facts slightly distorted, Mr Lovelaine. Mr Cranby and his wife were going over to do some ordering for themselves and, as usual,

they very kindly sent to ask whether I had any commissions I wished executed. I mentioned Eliza and they promised to look out for her on the quay on their return journey, that is all.'

'I see. Well, if I may repeat my question, what report did you receive from them?'

'None. I assume they did not run into Eliza.'

'We were told they had been briefed by you to find my aunt and ask her to return at once,' said Sebastian.

'That is absurd. Eliza is the senior partner. I do not give orders as to what she is or is not to do.'

'From what I remember of my sister,' said Marius, with a slight smile, 'I doubt whether it would be of much use if you did.' His expression altered. 'I shall be glad to see her for several reasons,' he added, 'not least to find out why my booking, which was completely arranged for by letter, does not appear in your records.'

Miss Crimp snorted and turned away from him.

'I don't like that woman,' said Sebastian to his father, as they walked back to the lounge. 'What are you going to do with yourself today, Father?'

'I think,' said Marius, 'that I shall give myself the pleasure of calling upon Dame Beatrice at *Puffins*.'

'Will she welcome visitors, Father?' asked Margaret.

'I can but send in my card, my dear. How do the two of you propose to occupy your time?'

'Oh, we have a good deal of the island to explore yet. We've done the east side pretty thoroughly, but we don't know so much about the west cliffs or the southern end, west of the landing stage,' replied Sebastian.

'I see. Er... I don't propose to dictate your movements in any way, of course, but I do not think you should become too friendly with Ransome Lovelaine.'

'Oh, why not, Father? He's a very nice man,' said Margaret, 'and you surely can't hold his parentage against him?'

'I hold nothing against him, my dear, and I am sure he is an estimable fellow. However, too close an acquaintanceship with him at this juncture might prove an embarrassment later on.'

'Oh, but why?' asked Sebastian. 'I mean, let's face it, Father. The object of our coming here, as I understood it, was to ingratiate ourselves with Aunt Eliza in the hope of benefits to come. Well, I must say it now appears to me that there won't be any benefits so far as our family is concerned. Ransome and his father

are the people on the spot and are quite evidently in favour with Aunt Eliza. Then there is Miss Crimp, a shareholder in the hotel. Ransome is a thoroughly decent fellow and we should like to pursue the acquaintanceship with no strings attached to it. We have nothing either to gain or to lose where Aunt Eliza is concerned, as I see it, and it would seem very odd if we dropped Ransome without any apparent reason, after he has shown himself so friendly.'

'Oh, well,' said Marius, 'you must please yourselves. There is a good deal of truth in what you say. Nevertheless, if Lizzie has not returned to the island by Wednesday, I shall be forced to the conclusion that she is deliberately staying away because she has changed her mind and does not want to meet me after all. In that case I adhere to my decision. We return on the Wednesday or the Thursday steamer. I shall have no second thoughts about that.'

'Poor old buster,' said Sebastian, as he and his sister left the hotel to go for a walk. 'He's an awful ass, but I do feel sorry for him. Underneath all that pompous blah, he's cut to the heart that Aunt Eliza is dodging meeting him again. His ideas are not entirely mercenary, you know. He genuinely wants a reconciliation. I believe, in fact, that that has been the truth all along. The inheritance thing was only a sop to Boobie.'

'And didn't work,' said Margaret. 'Do you really think he'll have the cheek to call at *Puffins*?'

'I don't know, and I don't care. I wish I knew whether there was any part of the island where these blasted bird-watchers won't be swarming. If I'd known the place was going to be turned into a sort of pop festival without even the advantage of the pop, I would never have come.'

'Don't you mind if we have to go home on Wednesday?'

'Oh, well, we may have exhausted all the local resources long before that.'

'I don't want to leave. I like it here,' said Margaret.

'Hey! You haven't gone all girlish about Ransome, I hope!' said her brother.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Body in the Sea

‘Adieu! farewell earth’s bliss,
This world uncertain is:
Fond are life’s lustful joys,
Death proves them all but toys.’

Thomas Nashe



Wednesday was an anxious day for Marius. The boat was not due until the middle of the afternoon if the previous Wednesday, the day of his arrival on the island, was anything to go by, and the time of waiting was tedious. He breakfasted late, and intended to lunch early and then sit out on the cliff top with his binoculars.

Sebastian and Margaret had departed immediately after breakfast, but upon what errand he did not enquire. His mind was occupied elsewhere. Indignation with Eliza was giving place to anxiety and he found it impossible to banish the thought that she might not even be on Wednesday’s boat and that he might have to face the alternatives of quitting the island and washing his hands of her or of setting on foot all sorts of enquiries which might involve seeking assistance from the police. Neither course recommended itself to him and more and more he wished he had never resumed contact with his sister or come to spend a holiday on her island.

The returning steamers carried mail to the mainland and he had written to Clothilde on Thursday announcing safe arrival and giving an impression of the hotel, but he had not mentioned anything about Eliza’s absence from it. He did not know how the mainland postal service operated, but he had hopes that, whatever the delay in the delivery of his letter, his wife’s reply would come on the boat which, with any luck, would also bring back his sister. If it did not, he tried to persuade himself that he was determined to return home on the following day.

Meanwhile his children were setting out on an expedition proposed, organised and provisionally financed by Margaret. There was only one shop on

the island. As she and her brother had already noted, it formed the other half of the public house.

‘But they won’t sell turpentine,’ Sebastian had objected when she disclosed her plan for their morning. ‘Besides, why should we clean up the local yobs’ horrid insignia?’

‘I aim to keep Britain tidy. I shouldn’t think it’s the islanders, anyway. They’ve probably had a boatload of skinheads or some such types come over from the mainland all ripe for mischief. It looks like that to me.’

‘Would they bring red paint with them?’

‘Of course, if they came prepared to paint their filthy slogans over everything.’

‘Those aren’t skinhead slogans.’

‘Why aren’t they? You didn’t mean it when you talked about satanists, did you?’

‘They’re all satanist symbols.’

‘The swastika?’

‘If you noticed, it’s not a true swastika; it’s a crooked cross.’

‘There’s the Star of David.’

‘Nonsense. That was a black magic pentagram.’

‘How do you know so much about it?’

‘I don’t, but a fellow on my staircase was talking about it, an American. Interesting chap. Got on to Voodoo and what-have-you.’

‘Some little lunatics in the third form at school started a witches’ coven, but they soon got into trouble about it.’

‘Why? The last of the witchcraft acts was repealed in England in 1951.’

‘Oh, it wasn’t the witchcraft the Head objected to. It was because they broke out at night to dance in their nudery on All Hallows Eve and caught the most dreadful colds. Anyway, they were kept in bed all over the half-term holiday. That put paid to the coven, I expect’

They made their way to the shop, but no turpentine was procurable and it was not even possible to get a drink, for the pub, although it did not recognise the statutory licensing hours, was closed.

‘So that’s that,’ said Sebastian.

‘No, it isn’t. We’ll call at Ransome’s cottage and ask for a drop of turps there.’

‘*You* can. I’m not going to. I’ve something better to do on holiday than clean up other people’s tombstones. It’s the business of the parish, anyway. Look,

there's the monthly service in the church next Sunday. Somebody will see the muck then and arrange for action to be taken. You've no need to concern yourself. Besides, if you're spotted cleaning up, somebody may think you did the job yourself in the first place.'

'Oh, nonsense! I'm going to talk to Ransome about it, anyway.'

'He won't thank you. He's bound to be busy. A smallholding doesn't run itself, you know. Let's do as we said we would—trace the river to its mouth and then go back along the west cliffs.'

'They're bound to be crawling with bird-watchers. I was out of our chalet at six this morning and they were setting off in their hundreds, all armed with ropes and rock-climbing things and telescopes and binoculars and cameras.'

'Hang it, there are only forty of them all told. They can't be everywhere.'

'I bet they are,' said Margaret. 'Anyway, that's what it will seem like. Well, let's just go and *look* at the churchyard again. It's more or less on our way.'

Arrived at the church, Margaret, followed slowly by her brother, sought out the desecrated tomb-stones. The staring red paint was still in evidence, but was smeared and smudged as though somebody had made an attempt to clean it off. She approached the graves more closely. It was now possible to make out the inscriptions. In each case the head-stone bore the name of Chayleigh. No other graves had been touched. There was something else which the Lovelaines had not noticed on their previous visit. Somebody had attempted to deface one woman's name and substitute another. The work had been done very roughly, but there was no doubt about the result. On the stone which had borne (and still faintly bore) the capital S and the word MURDER, the name of Gwendolyne Chayleigh had been chipped out and the name *Eliza Lovelaine* crudely substituted.

'Well!' exclaimed Margaret. 'Somebody doesn't like Aunt Eliza!'

'Not very nice,' said Sebastian, 'but not terribly significant of black magic. More like plain malice, I'd say. I think perhaps we *will* go and see Ransome. Hullo! There's somebody coming out of the church.'

The person who emerged from the south porch was a woman carrying a bucket and a broom. Sebastian, leaping over the intervening graves, caught up with her.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'but do you know about some tombstones on which somebody has been at work?'

'At work? How do you mean, at work?' she asked, looking at him with deep suspicion.

‘Painting them—daubing them with red paint—and altering the inscription on one of the headstones.’

‘Done it yourself, like enough.’ She eyed disparagingly his towelling shirt of sailcloth red and his very brief, bright-blue shorts.

‘No, no, really, I assure you! Do please come and look. I think there ought to be a witness, somebody who has to do with the place. I mean, the Vicar, or the Churchwardens, or some such, ought to know, what?’

‘Well, what?’ said the woman, putting down the bucket, retaining the broom (as a weapon, Sebastian fancied) and accompanying him to the grave by which Margaret was standing. ‘Be you having me on?’ But when she saw the altered inscription and the traces of paint, her attitude changed. ‘Well, that’s a nice thing, that is!’ she exclaimed. ‘You come with me.’ They followed her into the church. It was plainly furnished and ugly. ‘Mind how you step. Floor’s still wet and tiles might be slippery,’ she advised them. She led the way to the back of the nave to the space under the tower and, taking a key from her overall pocket, she unlocked the small door which led up to the belfry. ‘Just you take a look up there,’ she said, ‘and tell me what you see.’

‘I’ll go. You stay here,’ said Sebastian to his sister.

‘I want to see what it is, too,’ she said.

‘You may, when I come down.’

‘Don’t trust me not to lock the door on you both, is that it?’ asked the cleaner ironically.

‘Something of the sort may have crossed my mind,’ said Sebastian. ‘I don’t care for the look of those grave-stones.’ He mounted the stone steps and found that, after the first turn of the narrow staircase, the treads were made of open-meshed ironwork and were treacherously slippery. Beyond the bell-chamber the rest of the ascent had to be made by means of a ladder. Wound in and out of the rungs of this ladder was an elaborately woven one made of strands of rope into which were twisted some black feathers. Sebastian did not touch it. He knew, from what his college acquaintance had told him, what it was. He descended to the foot of the tower steps and nodded to the cleaner. ‘Yes, I see what you mean,’ he said. ‘Who, on the island, goes in for black magic?’

The woman shook her head.

‘There’s only one on the island as was born wrong side of the blanket,’ she said. ‘Oh, well, him being churchwarden, the less said about that the better. I’m your witness and you be mine, and best neither on us meddle with what we’ve seen. You go your ways now, while I lock up.’

‘Do you always keep the church locked?’ asked Margaret. ‘Do wait just a minute while *I* climb the tower.’

‘Nothing much to see,’ said Sebastian. ‘Come on. We’re keeping this lady waiting.’ He hustled his sister towards the south door.

‘Us keep it locked, certainly,’ said the cleaner, producing a large key when they reached the porch. ‘Oh, yes, us keep it locked, but them as knows where to look can always lay hands on the key. Go you before me. No call for strangers to find out where I put it.’

Ransome was lifting shallots. He straightened up and smiled at his cousins.

‘What-ho!’ he said. ‘Any news of my mother?’

‘They’re expecting her back today,’ Sebastian replied. ‘There’s something else we want to talk about.’

Ransome stuck his gardening-fork into the soil.

‘I was going to knock off for my elevenses, anyway,’ he said. ‘Can you drink home-brewed cider?’ He led the way into his cottage. It was simply furnished and in peasant fashion except for a long wall of bookshelves which must have held several hundred volumes, for the shelves went from near the floor almost up to the ceiling and were so crammed with books that many of these were lying on their sides on top of those which were right-way-up on the shelves. Marius had a considerable library and Sebastian and Margaret had been allowed the run of it—subject to a certain amount of supervision when they were very young—but Ransome appeared to possess more books than Marius. He followed the direction of Sebastian’s eyes and smiled. ‘I must say I like a bit of a read,’ he said. ‘What did you come about, then?’

While they drank his cider and ate delicious fruit-cake which, Ransome told them, the farmer’s wife had supplied, they told him all about the tomb-stones and Sebastian described the black magic rope ladder which he had seen in the church tower.

‘I thought the church was always locked,’ said Ransome.

‘The cleaner took us inside.’

‘Chief witch of the local coven, you know.’ He appeared to be about to add to this information, but checked himself.

‘No, really?’ exclaimed Margaret. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Perfectly serious. She’s a white witch, of course. No black magic or satanism about her—well, not so far as I know. However, she’s head of the coven.’

‘But she cleans the church!’

‘Why shouldn’t she? Gets paid for it, like any other woman. Not that she’s kept short of money. Looks after our fowls and hangs on to all that she gets.’

‘But witches are not churchgoers, are they?’ persisted Margaret.

‘Well, no, I reckon not, but there’s no harm in this one. Goes in for herbal healing, and when any woman on the island is with child they always send for her to assist at the birth. They say she’s better than any trained midwife and wonderful at easing labour pains.’

‘What will happen about the headstones?’ asked Sebastian. ‘I mean, the way they’ve been treated is sheer vandalism. Have you had anything of the sort before?’

‘Not to my knowledge. Makes you wonder what has triggered it off, doesn’t it? Well, I’ll see the vicar is told about it. Not that he takes much stock in us, only seeing us once in four weeks, and this Sunday it won’t be the regular parson anyway, because he’s on furlough, so it will only be a stand-in, and lucky to get *him*, I reckon. Still, he can report it in the proper quarters, I daresay, although whether that will do any good, with all the lawlessness there is nowadays, is anybody’s guess. Oh, well, I’m afraid I must get back to work, if you’ll excuse me. Promised dad I’d do a couple of little carpentering jobs for him this afternoon if I get time.’

‘Oh, are he and his wife back, then?’ asked Margaret.

‘Dad’s back. Didn’t bring my mam back with him, though. Said he looked out for her, too. Lucy is staying with friends for a day or two.’

‘Forty bird-watchers came over, but not Aunt Eliza,’ said Sebastian. ‘Well, thanks very much for the nosh. Mrs... er... the farmer’s wife—’

‘Lucy Cranby. Dad’s name is Allen Cranby.’

‘Mrs Cranby must be a first-class cook.’

‘Yes. Pity she’s still away, you must meet her when you’ve got time. Of course,’ Ransome went on, ‘dad would have married my mam, you know, if only he had been free. That being so, I’ve never felt all that much of a bastard. Not that the islanders would care. Still, you know how it is. My mam gave my dad the farm. It was part of old Gwendolyne Chayleigh’s estate, she whose name my mam took.’

‘It’s the Chayleigh headstones in the churchyard which have been daubed and desecrated,’ said Margaret.

‘Is it now? That’s interesting. I wouldn’t put it past Connie Crimp to have done that. She’s an odd sort of woman altogether. Well, sorry I’ve got to go. Stay as long as you like, so long as you shut the front door behind you so the cows

won't get in.'

'Oh, we're ready for off,' said Sebastian.

During its short course from the centre of the island down to the sea, the river—dignified by this title simply because it happened to be about twice as wide as the brooks which flowed to the east side of Great Skua—dropped four hundred feet from its source to its mouth. It rushed, yelled and tumbled down the narrow gorge which it had cut for itself and at first, as they followed the narrow path along its bank, the walkers felt that there was no sound in the world except the roar of falling water.

Margaret and Sebastian, therefore, did not attempt conversation. Not only would it have involved shouting at one another, but the path, in any case, was too narrow to allow them to walk abreast. To begin with, it was almost at water level, but soon it ran high above the river, which then appeared to be a thread of brown and silver, almost hidden from view by the trees which clothed its banks.

The trees thinned out as the river approached the sea, and gave place to short, brown, springy turf, and while, far below them, the river poured itself towards the sea in a series of small waterfalls, the brother and sister found themselves on top of the magnificent cliffs which formed the west or Atlantic seaboard.

A footbridge over the small ravine gave access to the northern end of the island, but the walkers turned southwards along a footpath which followed the line of the cliffs and led towards the hotel. On their way they came to the second of the disused lighthouses which had been supplanted by the two modern ones.

'Somebody up on the gallery,' said Margaret.

'One of the blasted bird-watchers, I expect,' said her brother.

'He's seen us. What does he want?' asked Margaret.

The man had come to the shoreward side of the gallery and was engaged in violent gesticulation.

'It can't be us he's signalling. Probably spotted one of his mates and wants to show him the snake-headed sharktail or something equally ridiculous,' said Sebastian.

'No,' said Margaret, 'it's us he wants. I think he's coming down.' The man had disappeared from the gallery. In a few moments he came galloping over the turf towards them.

'Hi! Hi!' he shouted. 'Hi! Just a minute! Hi!'

'Swing low, sweet chariot!' muttered Sebastian. 'Better stop and see what he wants, I suppose.'

The man, middle-aged and breathless, was dressed in tweeds and a

deerstalker cap. Waving a pair of binoculars, he came charging up to them, spluttering out his message.

‘Could you come?’ he panted. ‘Something on the rocks out there. Doesn’t look right. Come and look. *Please!*’

‘Not particularly interested in sea-birds, I’m afraid,’ said Sebastian, recoiling. ‘Wouldn’t one of your own lot...?’

‘Oh, no, nothing like that. Please do come. I can’t spot any of the club members and I’ve got my wife with me. She is most upset. If we investigate—and I think we must—another lady—to be with my wife you know. You see—well, I rather think it’s somebody drowned out there. A body. Washed up, you know. Do please come and see, and then we can decide what to do.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Usual Routine

‘Skilful anglers hide their hooks, fit baits for every season;
But with crooked pins fish thou, as babes do, that want reason:
Gudgeons only can be caught with such poor tricks of treason.’

Thomas Campion



Sebastian accompanied the agitated bird-watcher to the lighthouse and Margaret followed. Unlike the first of the disused towers which they had seen on a previous excursion, this one, midway along the turbulent Atlantic coast, was accessible to visitors, a fact explained by the guide as they climbed the steps to the lamp-room and the gallery.

‘We got permission to use it as a lookout,’ he said. ‘Our society, you know. Here, take my binoculars and have a look. Out there, between two rocks. What do you make that out to be?’

Sebastian, with a nod to a middle-aged, trousered woman who had turned from the gallery rail at their approach, trained the very powerful binoculars towards black and green rocks against and over which a spiteful sea boiled and fretted.

‘Difficult to be sure,’ he said, ‘but it does look like a person. The coastguards are the people to deal with this. They’ll get a boat round there and look into things.’

‘May I see?’ asked Margaret. She took the glasses and gazed long at the heaving object which the rollers were flinging about in a cloud of spume and fury. ‘It *is* somebody. It’s a woman. I *think* ...’ she handed the binoculars to their owner. ‘I think it might be Aunt Eliza.’

‘Good Lord! Whatever makes you say that?’ exclaimed Sebastian, appalled. ‘You’ve nothing whatever to go on!’

‘Only the fact that Aunt Eliza is unaccountably missing,’ said his sister composedly. ‘Will you go for the coastguards or shall I?’

‘Oh, but there aren’t any coastguards on Great Skua,’ said the woman.

‘Well, we’d better let Farmer Cranby know,’ interrupted her husband. ‘*He’ll*

arrange for something to be done.'

'Cranby? All right, we'll go,' said Sebastian. 'You stay here and keep an eye on things. We'll get there quicker than you will.'

Before the two bird-watchers could argue about the matter, he seized his sister by the elbow and drew her towards the stairs, and in a minute or two they were running towards the farm.

'Why didn't you let that man go?' asked Margaret, as they reached Ransome's cottage and saw him at the bottom of his garden.

'What I said. We're quicker. Besides, we don't want to get mixed up in anything if it *is* Aunt Eliza. Not that you've any proof.' He halted at the gate and called out to Ransome, who leisurely put down the saw he had been using and strolled towards them.

'Anything up?' he asked.

'There's a body in the sea. Looks like a woman. Some birdwatchers spotted her.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Not far from that old lighthouse on the east cliff. We think she's caught up among the rocks, but you can't see much because the rocks partly hide her.'

'All right, I'll get some of the men. It will have to be Dimbleton's boat. Must be one of the visitors done something foolish, I reckon. Dangerous they are, the currents round and about, but it's no good telling people. They all think they know, better than we do, where it's safe to bathe, and all that.'

'It isn't a bather. This woman is fully dressed. We're afraid it's Aunt Eliza,' blurted out Margaret.

'My mam? Oh, *no*!' Ransome vaulted the gate and ran towards the farmhouse. Sebastian said:

'Well, we've done what we can. Better get back to the hotel. If, by any chance, it *is* Aunt Eliza, father may like to have us there when the news is brought to him.'

It took time and skill to rescue the body from the rocks and get it on board the boat and back to the only landing-stage. The word had gone round and those who had watched the operation from the lighthouse gallery and the top of the cliffs raced along to the jetty to see the dead woman brought ashore. All that there was to satisfy their morbid curiosity, however, was wrapped in a tarpaulin. The cart used for the transport of luggage to the hotel had been requisitioned and the patient nag between the shafts pulled all that remained of the woman up the steeply-mounting road to the hotel.

Here the cortège was met at the entrance by Miss Crimp, who, somewhat hysterically, refused to give the body house-room.

‘I have my guests to consider,’ she said. ‘I can’t possibly have it in the hotel!’

‘But, ma’am, we’re pretty sure as it’s Mrs Chayleigh, what belong here,’ protested the boatman Dimbleton. ‘Fair knocked about, she be, but not much doubt in any of our minds.’

‘I can’t have her brought into the hotel, I tell you. You must get a doctor. He’ll tell you what to do.’

‘If you’d just take a peek at her, ma’am.’

‘Certainly not, until someone in authority orders me to do so. I will enquire whether there is a medical practitioner among my guests, but that is the most I can manage. You men must understand that this is a hotel, not a morgue. My guests are at dinner.’

There was an angry murmur among the fishermen who had assisted Dimbleton, and Miss Crimp, leaving the porter on guard at the door, went into the dining-room and demanded, in a voice shrill with nerves, whether there was a doctor among those present, although she must have known that none of her guests was qualified to answer the call.

‘There is one on the island, at any rate, Miss Crimp,’ said Marius, rising from the table which he was sharing with his children. ‘Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, at the house known, I believe, as *Puffins*, is a fully-qualified doctor of medicine and will know what to do.’ (His children had not told him of their fears, and he thought only of a bathing fatality).

To *Puffins*, therefore, trundled the cart with its pitiful and most unlovely burden. The door was opened by the stocky, respectable man who, on the mainland and at her own home, acted as chauffeur and general handyman to Dame Beatrice but, as there was no car on the island, was employed in the house to assist the only other two servants, her cook and her general maid, whom she had sent before her. He surveyed the tarpaulin-covered figure on the cart without enthusiasm.

‘Found drowned,’ said one of the rescuers, ‘but a doctor’s the usual thing in these cases. Dimbleton’s taking his boat across to alert the police and they’ll bring their own surgeon, no doubt, but they won’t get here, most likely, until tomorrow, so would your lady oblige?’

‘Well, you can’t bring a body in here,’ said George, austerely. ‘There’s a shed round the back. Come and help me take the door off so’s we can carry the corpse in there. Who is it?’

‘We don’t know for certain. Fish been and got at it—crabs and such.’

‘Oh, dear, oh, dear! Madam isn’t going to like that much, I’m afraid.’ He led the way round the house and, by the united efforts of himself and the helpers, the body was laid out ready for Dame Beatrice’s informed inspection. It had been badly knocked about by its battering against the rocks, but she directed her chief attention to a deep ragged cut on the back of the scalp.

‘I suppose the police have been sent for?’ she said.

‘So I understand, madam,’ said George, ‘but I am told they may not reach the island until tomorrow.’

‘Just a routine check, or is there a case for them?’ asked Laura, as Dame Beatrice, having thrown a pair of housemaid’s rubber gloves into the dustbin and followed them with the overall she had been wearing, went with her secretary back to the house.

‘It is impossible to say without a complete post-mortem examination and an autopsy. The body has sustained a severe fracture of the skull and other injuries, but it remains to be determined whether these are the result of a murderous attack or the result of a fatal accident. The body is indescribably battered, but that could be from a pounding on the rocks among which, George tells me, it was found, or from a fall from the cliffs, or both. From my necessarily cursory examination, I do not think this was a death from drowning, but the autopsy will settle that. She has certainly been dead for some days, so she cannot be one of the ornithologists, otherwise she might have fallen when climbing the cliffs. That *could* account for her injuries. I wonder who will identify the body?’

This question soon received an answer. A worried and anxious Marius Lovelaine, accompanied by an unwilling and apprehensive Miss Crimp, presented himself at the house some half-an-hour later and announced his fears that the dead woman might be his sister. He introduced the shrinking Miss Crimp and explained that, as he had not set eyes on his sister for more than twenty years, he had thought it wise to bring along someone who had been in close touch with her much more recently. Miss Crimp murmured wretchedly that she was perfectly certain the body could not be that of poor dear Eliza, and the two visitors were conducted to the shed, on the floor and walls of which, for obvious reasons (as there was no possibility of treating the corpse itself) strong household disinfectant had been freely sprinkled.

Marius gave vent to an expression of horror and Miss Crimp complained of faintness and had to be helped outside by Laura, but both agreed that the corpse was that of Eliza Lovelaine, generally known as Eliza Chayleigh.

‘Come into the house and be seated. You must have a restorative,’ said Dame Beatrice briskly. ‘Does either of you wish to tell me what you know about this unfortunate affair?—or would you rather keep your story for the police?’

‘Speaking for myself,’ said Marius, in his precise way, ‘I know next to nothing. I had been estranged from my sister for many years and was greatly surprised and somewhat touched to receive from her, last Easter, an account of her doings and a brochure which described the hotel here, together with a request that my family and I should spend a holiday with her this summer. I was a trifle surprised that she expected us to pay full rates for our accommodation, but I did not know, until I arrived here, that she had a partner, Miss Crimp, to whom, of course, she was partly accountable for the profits accruing from the business. When I learned this, I could see why we could not expect any monetary concessions.’

Having delivered himself of this neat exposition, Marius took a sip of the brandy which had been provided, sat back in his chair and left the field to Miss Crimp. Colour had come back to her cheeks and she seemed eager to give her own version of the story.

‘To begin with,’ she said, ‘it came as the greatest surprise to me that Mr Lovelaine and his son and daughter arrived at the hotel at all. No booking had been made in their name, neither had poor Eliza said anything whatsoever to me about their coming. Fortunately I was able to accommodate them, although in the opinion of Mr Lovelaine, not altogether adequately.’

‘No, no,’ said Marius hastily. ‘Really, you must forget all that. Really you must. I was far from understanding the situation when I complained. Bygones must be bygones, Miss Crimp, especially considering the melancholy nature of our present errand.’

‘Indeed, yes,’ said Miss Crimp, taking an unwise, emotional mouthful of brandy and coughing until tears came to her eyes.

‘Yes, indeed,’ she added, recovering. ‘Besides, it would have been quite all right except for these argumentative birdwatchers. I was over-persuaded by Eliza in that respect. We should at any rate have limited their numbers. If only I had had my way and we had accommodated fewer of them, *and* charged them the proper rates, we should have lost very little money, and everybody would have been far more comfortable.’

‘Perhaps we should return to the matter in hand. So far as I can tell,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘the body has been dead for several days. Did you not miss your partner long before today? Did it not occur to you to wonder where she was and

what had happened to explain her absence?’

‘Well, yes and no to that, Dame Beatrice. I mean, I knew she had gone across to the mainland to order extra stores because of these naturalists, but I had certainly become perturbed at her continued absence. I was even uncharitable enough to think that she was delaying her return on purpose, leaving me to cope with this unwonted influx of visitors.’

‘Would that be like her? Was she a selfish, inconsiderate woman?’

‘Well, one doesn’t speak ill of the dead, but I must admit that Eliza could be very arbitrary and difficult at times.’

‘When did she leave the island for the mainland?’

‘Today fortnight.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Marius. ‘A week before our arrival? I hardly realised she had been gone so long!’

‘Oh, I knew she would be gone for several days, Mr Lovelaine. When she had placed her orders she was going on to London. I think I remember telling you so. She said she needed a break before we had to cope with this invasion of ornithologists. I was rather angry about it, but there was nothing I could do. Eliza could be very wilful and demanding and would listen to nobody once she got an idea into her head.’

‘Well, Dame Beatrice,’ said Marius, rising, ‘we must not trespass upon your time and kindness any longer. Is it possible for the... er... for the body to remain where it is?’

‘Oh, no! Oh, no!’ exclaimed Miss Crimp. ‘Eliza’s place is in her own home! I would never have had her brought here had I known whose body it was.’

‘You must do as you wish,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘My shed is at your disposal and that of the police and their surgeon, of course, but if you desire to take the body to the hotel I can offer no argument against such a course except that, in its present condition, the... corpse...’

‘Missing since yesterday fortnight?’ said Detective-Inspector Rendall when interviewing Miss Crimp the following day. ‘When did you begin making enquiries about her, then?’

‘But she hasn’t been *missing* since yesterday two weeks,’ protested Miss Crimp. ‘She crossed to the mainland to order a large quantity of stores. That could have taken her two or three days. Then she was going up to London for a little change. That could have taken her perhaps another two days — even longer, if she decided to extend her stay. I was not in the least *worried* about her, Inspector.’

‘But you say she knew you were expecting all these extra visitors.’

‘Oh, yes, of course she knew.’

‘She knew the exact date when they were due?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Well, weren’t you worried when she didn’t turn up to help you cope with them?’

‘Not *worried*, Inspector, no. I was rather put out — cross with her, you know — but it never occurred to me to be *worried*. Eliza—Mrs Chayleigh, as she was known—was a very capable and self-sufficient person. One would never think of anything *happening* to her.’

‘Did you actually see her board the mainland boat?’

‘Of course I didn’t. We could not both be spared from the hotel at the same time. I did not even see her set out. I was superintending turning out the upstairs rooms. With all these naturalists coming, it was impossible to leave all the arrangements to the last minute. There were all sorts of things to be worked out and settled.’

‘But you did take it for granted that she had caught the boat?’

‘Why, of course I did! Why should she not? Besides, she was not in to lunch, tea or dinner. Of course I assumed she had caught the boat.’

‘Do you know of any other persons who were to catch the boat that day?’

‘Oh, yes, several of our visitors checked out that morning.’

‘You had better let me have a list of their names and addresses. They will be able to establish whether Mrs Chayleigh was on the boat or not.’

‘Of course she was on it,’ reiterated Miss Crimp. She produced ledgers. ‘Do you wish to write the names down, or shall I?’

‘Perhaps we can save you the trouble, madam, if you will just show the sergeant how you keep the arrivals and departures columns.’

‘Oh, well, our system is very simple. Here is the register where the guests sign their names with the date of arrival, and here is our commonplace book in which we record bookings and length of stay. This other ledger shows payments, including any extras.’

‘Ah, yes, money. Did Mrs Chayleigh plan to take much with her? You say she proposed to lay in stores and also to spend some time in London.’

‘She would not need money for the stores. They would be invoiced to us and we should pay for them by cheque.’

‘Were the stores Mrs Chayleigh was supposed to order — I mean, did they turn up all right?’

‘No, Inspector, they did not. I blamed poor Eliza very much for that. Fortunately we keep plenty of things in stock, so nobody went short of food or anything else. Still, I could not have managed for many more days, with all those ornithologists flocking in.’

‘Well, madam, you might check with your wholesalers on the mainland, if you will, but, given your evidence and all the circumstances, it seems impossible that Mrs Chayleigh can have boarded the boat that Wednesday and crossed to the mainland at all.’

‘Then what can have happened, Inspector? Nobody on the island would do Eliza an injury. She was very well thought of on Great Skua.’

‘I am not suggesting that she was set upon, madam, although strange things have happened in the most law-abiding communities. So far as the police-surgeon is concerned, her injuries could have been caused by an accidental fall from the cliffs or, of course, suicide by the same means.’

‘Suicide, if you had known Eliza, is out of the question, Inspector.’

‘Ah, well, lots of people think that, when they are acquainted with the deceased, madam. We have to bring an open mind to the question. All the same, these cliffs are noted for being very dangerous in windy weather, I believe.’

‘Oh, poor Eliza! But I’m sure she would never have ventured so near the edge as to be blown over into the sea and get herself drowned.’

‘One never knows what foolish capers people will get up to, madam.’

‘Oh, but Eliza wasn’t foolish, Inspector. She was a busy and sensible woman. Her death has been a grievous shock to me.’

‘You understand that there will have to be an inquest, don’t you?’

‘Oh, well, yes, but where can it be held? There is nowhere on the island.’

‘Furthermore, in view of the nature of some of the injuries, it will be necessary to have an autopsy.’

‘You mean you will cut poor Eliza up?’

‘We shall try to dispose of any doubts as to how she met her death.’

‘But surely she was drowned? Dame Beatrice thought not, but she was picked up out of the water.’

‘Well, the post-mortem will decide it. Her injuries are very severe.’

‘Shall I need to appear at the inquest?’

‘Possibly, but a great deal will depend on the medical evidence. I’m afraid the proceedings *will* have to be carried out on the mainland. As you point out, there are no facilities here.’

‘But if I am needed over there, what is going to happen to the hotel?’

‘I expect your head-waiter or someone can cope for a couple of days. I’m afraid you’ll just have to find some way of managing, won’t you?’

The police had chartered their own launch and the two plain-clothes men who had been left in charge of it took Eliza’s body back with them. Miss Crimp begged Marius to come into her office for a conference.

‘A conference?’ said Marius. ‘With what object, Miss Crimp?’

‘I feel there are matters we ought to discuss.’

‘What matters?’

‘Well, there is poor Eliza’s will. With this happening so suddenly, I want to know where I stand.’

‘It seems rather early for that thought, does it not? It is customary to wait until after the funeral, I believe.’

‘There’s a reason,’ said Miss Crimp. ‘I don’t think the police believe that Eliza ever *intended* to leave the island.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘The inspector looked at me in the most suspicious way. I’m sure he thinks I’ve told lies. And what do they want with cutting up my poor friend?’

‘They will want to establish, as far as possible, exactly when she died, and how death was caused. There are signs, you know. The body tells its own tale.’

‘What signs? What tale?’ Miss Crimp asked in agitated tones.

‘Well, I am a doctor of philosophy, not of medicine, so I can scarcely tell you. And I do not know how much difference it makes that the body has been in the sea. But the police have their routine. It is of no use for us to worry.’

‘And *do* you worry, Father?’ asked Margaret, later.

‘No, that is not the right word. I am deeply perturbed and sad, but worry does not enter into it. It is something of a comfort, in fact, that your poor aunt must have been dead before we ever set foot on the island.’

‘Why do you put it like that, Father?’

‘Well, my dear, her death appears to be somewhat of a mystery and, not to boggle at the truth, I believe I have certain expectations over and above those which are known to the rest of you.’

‘Oh, but, Father, nobody would ever suspect you—’

‘Of course not! Of course not! All the same, I am glad there can be no possible reason for doing so.’

CHAPTER NINE

Questions and Answers

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply.'

William Shakespeare



Well, but, Father,' said Margaret later on, 'Seb and I didn't even *know* Aunt Eliza and we like it here. Couldn't we stay? It's a bit hard on Miss Crimp, after she made room for us when we weren't even booked in, if all three of us just walk out on her.'

'Well, yes, there is something in that, I suppose,' said Marius heavily. Although he had not seen his sister for more than twenty years, he was shocked by her death and the manner of it and wanted only to leave the island and return to his quiet existence and his caustic but practical spouse. 'I suppose there is no reason why you two should not stay if you wish to do so, but I shall go on this afternoon's boat. I must attend the inquest, I suppose, for the look of the thing, if for no other reason, and there is nothing for me here now, so, when I go, I shall not, I imagine, need to return. The interment will be in the family grave, of course, but there is no need for either of you two or your mother to attend the funeral.'

'And then there's the will,' said Sebastian to his sister, after they had returned to their chalet. 'Personally, I think The Tutor is starry-eyed if he thinks that, after all those years of separation and the row with Boobie, Aunt Eliza has left him anything.' .?

'To do him justice, Seb, I don't believe he's given a thought to that side of things, although, of course...' " She remembered her father's remarks on the subject.

'Oh, well, he will. After all, what was the idea behind this expedition? Of course at present he's suffering from horror, but he'll come to and begin taking notice as soon as the funeral is over. One wouldn't blame him. His generation

are like that. Always, after the pious snuffle, the eye to the main chance.'

'I shouldn't think there would be a "main chance" with Miss Crimp in possession of the place. She has a calculating and fishy eye.'

'Well, what are we going to do with ourselves this afternoon?'

'There's not so very much of it left. Seb, why have you changed your mind about wanting to stay here? The last I heard was that we would have exhausted the island in another day or two. Why did you tell me to tackle The Tutor and beg him to let us stay?'

'Ah!' said Sebastian, investing the word with deep meaning.

'Oh, come on!'

'Wait until he's cleared off back to the mainland, then I might tell you. Meanwhile, I have two thoughts about this afternoon. One is that I want to have another word with Ransome about witchcraft. That business of the headstones and the rope ladder was rather intriguing. The other is that I want to see a man about a boat.'

'You're not thinking of going round to those rocks where they picked up—where they found her—are you? Oh, I don't think that's a good idea at all. The men with Dimbleton had an awful job, and they know the coast and you don't. Besides, the police inspector may still be around and he won't want you messing about down there.'

'Why not? He can't prevent me from doing a spot of deep-sea fishing, and I shan't be in charge of the boat. That will be J. Dimbleton's job.'

'Oh, well, then, I'll come with you if he'll let you hire from him. Seb, do *you* think Aunt Eliza ever went to the mainland?'

'Difficult to believe that she did, but, if not, why not? I'm sure La Crimp thought she'd gone.'

'But it was such a peculiar thing of her not to be here on the day she knew we were coming.'

'You think Crimp was lying, then? And why do you think our booking wasn't registered?'

'I don't know what to think, but I'll tell you what, Seb. I've a good mind to pump our chambermaid. She seems a simple soul and all the servants are bound to be full of chatter about Aunt Eliza's death.'

'There's another tiny point which occurs to me. We were told that the farmer chap — Ransome's father — and his wife chartered Dimbleton's boat to go across for their shopping. Of course, if it happened to come cheaper than the regular mainland run, well and good, but do you really think it would?'

‘Ransome would know. We’ll ask him. We don’t have to mention the farmer. We can make the enquiry, all innocent-like, when we mention we want to hire the boat for ourselves.’

A pass-key turned in the lock of the chalet door and the chambermaid came in. She stopped short when she saw that the occupants were at home.

‘Oh, sorry, sir,’ she said. ‘I’ve been given the afternoon off, so I just come in to turn down the beds.’

‘And you are as welcome as the flowers in May,’ said Sebastian. ‘Tell me, though, for I am a neophyte in these matters, what is the reason for the ritual?’

‘The what, sir?’

‘This turning down of beds. What’s the object of it?’

‘We just have to do it, sir. It’s laid down.’

‘I thought Friday was your afternoon off,’ said Margaret. ‘Why has it been changed to today?’

‘In the ordinary way, yes, tomorrow, miss, but it’s been changed because of the upset.’

‘Mrs Chayleigh’s death?’ asked Sebastian.

‘That’s right, sir. We might be wanted tomorrow to answer questions, so Miss Crimp give me and Walter, as should be having our half-day tomorrow, she give us today instead.’

‘By questions, do you mean questions from the police,’ asked Sebastian.

‘That’s right, sir. “Answer up prompt and truthful,” Miss Crimp says, “and, if you don’t know, don’t hang about and waste the inspector’s time. Just *say* you don’t know. And what on earth they think you *can* know has me beat,” she says.’

‘And *do* you know anything?’

‘Not to say *know*, sir, not nothing I don’t, but if they was to ask me did I see her get on the boat, well, I did *not*, sir, and nobody’s going to make me say as I did.’

‘But how *could* you see her get on the boat?’ asked Margaret. ‘You weren’t down at the landing-stage, were you?’

The girl hesitated.

‘Come on,’ said Sebastian. ‘You can tell *us*. In fact, we’d very much like to know. You may not have been told this, but Mrs Chayleigh was our aunt. Her real name was Miss Lovelaine. She was my father’s only sister.’

‘Oh, sir, you’re having me on!’

‘No, he isn’t,’ said Margaret, ‘so tell us what you know. It might be very important.’

‘Miss Crimp said not to talk to anybody but that inspector.’

‘By “anybody” she only meant newspaper reporters,’ said Sebastian craftily. ‘She didn’t mean Aunt Eliza’s relatives.’

‘Well...’ The chambermaid thought it over. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘p’raps you do have a right to know. I’m allus supposed to be doin’ out the chalets, see, when the boat puts in, but I ain’t, because when I’m doin’ out the chalets it’s easy enough to slip away and get down to the beach, and my feller’s one of the boatmen, see? Miss Crimp and Mrs Chayleigh is always kep’ very busy when the boat puts in, because there’s them as is comin’ to the hotel and there’s them as is leavin’ and there’s often stores to be seen to, oh, and a mort o’ things to do. Of course, I never knew, not till all the rumours started, as Mrs Chayleigh was thought to ’ave caught the boat. All I know is as she never did. You won’t let on as I’ve told you, will you? I could get in trouble if it was knowed as I slipped away from me work to ’ave a word with Bob.’

‘You’d have been in trouble if Mrs Chayleigh *had* caught the boat,’ said Margaret, ‘wouldn’t you?’

‘Oh, I knowed where she was. She was over to *Puffins*, that big ’ouse in the dip. I ’eard Miss Crimp say as there wasn’t nobody else free to go.’

‘Go? What for?’ asked Sebastian.

‘Oh, to drop in some bacon and eggs for the visitors what was rentin’ the ’ouse for the summer. They never knew I ’eard, but it never crossed my mind. I never thought no more about it, ’cept to watch out. I just watched ’er go down the dip and then I run out and down the cliff road. I didn’t talk to Bob not more than ten minutes, in case I should be missed, and because he was busy checking the people as was wanting to be took out to the steamer and gettin’ their luggage aboard. I come up the road behind the new lot of visitors, and I never see Mrs Chayleigh again.’

‘But didn’t that surprise you?’ asked Sebastian.

‘Oh, no, because when Miss Crimp started to fret I thought Mrs Chayleigh had caught Thursday’s boat, you see, being as I knowed she hadn’t gone over on the Wednesday.’

‘Eggs and bacon?’ said Margaret. ‘But why take them all that time in advance?’

‘In advance of what, miss?’

‘Oh, nothing, really. Look, we’re keeping you here talking when it’s your half-day off. I’m awfully sorry.’

‘What was that about eggs and things?’ asked Sebastian, when the

chambermaid had gone.

‘Nothing much, except that, as the stuff comes up fresh from the farm, and Dame Beatrice and Laura didn’t come on that Wednesday but a week later, I can’t see any point in Aunt Eliza’s going over to *Puffins* on the Wednesday, afternoon.’

‘Oh, I expect Dame Beatrice’s servants were coming by the Wednesday boat to get the house ready. The stuff would have been for them.’

‘Then they might know something about what happened to Aunt Eliza that afternoon.’

‘No, because the boat wouldn’t have been in when Aunt Eliza went across to *Puffins*. You know, Maggie, she seems to have disappeared from that house, doesn’t she? I think we might do a lot worse than go over there and have a word with Dame Beatrice.’

‘But, Seb, we’ve never met her!’

‘The Tutor has—and we know Laura. Come on, let’s take the bull by the horns. There’s something dashed peculiar about all this, and I think we ought to try to sort it out.’

‘But if those provisions were meant for the servants, and the servants were expected that Wednesday, there’s nothing to sort out, is there?’

‘There is, if Aunt Eliza meant to dump the provisions and catch the boat and obviously *didn’t* catch it. Besides, how would she get into *Puffins*, anyway, to leave the things? Would she have had a key?’

‘She could have left them in the porch or somewhere, I suppose.’

‘Well, I’m going to clear it up, if only for my own satisfaction. Coming with me?’

Dame Beatrice greeted the young people kindly and offered them tea. She and her secretary had knocked off work on the *Memoirs* and were ready, she informed them (with a terrifying leer) for intellectual conversation.

‘Not intellectual, I’m afraid,’ said Sebastian. ‘The fact is that we’ve just heard a rather incredible tale about Mrs Chayleigh—our aunt, you know—and as this house was mentioned we thought you might like to hear it.’

‘Rather incredible?’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Delightful. Do go on.’

‘You, Seb. You don’t waffle as much as I do,’ said Margaret.

‘Well, I don’t want to waste time by going over well-trodden ground,’ said Sebastian. ‘Dame Beatrice knows about Aunt Eliza.’

‘Ah, yes. Yes, indeed,’ murmured Dame Beatrice. ‘You don’t have to be sorry for us,’ Sebastian went on. ‘We’ve never met my aunt. There was a family

row before we were born. Then Aunt Eliza wrote a surprising sort of letter inviting my father to bring us all here for a month's holiday. My mother wouldn't come. When we arrived there was no Aunt Eliza and no rooms booked. Miss Crimp took us in, though, and then there began this panic because Aunt Eliza was supposed to have gone over to the mainland and she hadn't said a word to Miss Crimp about our coming and she didn't return to the hotel. The next thing, as you know, Dame Beatrice, was the discovery of her body.'

'Which has now been transported to the mainland.'

'Yes. The next part of the story we've just had from our chambermaid at the hotel. She says that on the Wednesday, exactly a week before we came here—we came, you remember, on the same day as you did—Aunt Eliza came to this house with some provisions. She doesn't seem to have been seen alive again. The idea was that, after she'd left the food here, she was to catch the Wednesday boat for the mainland, but it seems certain that she couldn't have done. For one thing, this maid says that she would have spotted her.'

'Why?' asked Laura. 'Why would the maid have spotted her?'

'She'd popped down to the landing-stage to have a word with her young man,' Margaret replied.

'And as she was A.W.O.L.,' added Sebastian, 'she would have been keeping her weather-eye open. Besides, if our aunt had ever left the island, it's most unlikely her body would have been found off the east cliff.'

'Well, as to that,' said Laura, 'it could have been carried that way on Dead Man's Day, the race I told you about the first time we were swimming. You remember that, I expect. All the same, it does seem certain that Mrs Chayleigh never left this island, no matter where the body was put into the water.'

'The body? You mean she wasn't drowned?'

'We must wait for the result of the autopsy, of course,' said Dame Beatrice, 'but my own opinion would be that the chief injury she had suffered (however it was caused) must certainly have killed her. That wound on the head was not sustained after death. Of that I am reasonably certain. But your statement that she called here to deliver a parcel of goods is most intriguing.'

'We thought they might have been for your servants, if somebody came here to get the house ready before you arrived,' said Sebastian.

'A logical assumption. Let us test it.' Dame Beatrice rang the bell and an elderly, neatly-dressed, sharp-featured servant appeared.

'Madame?' she said, casting a brief but suspicious glance at the visitors.

'Oh, Celestine,' said her employer, 'on which day did you, Henri and George

get here?’

‘On the Saturday, madame, before you and Madame Gavin arrived on the following Wednesday.’ Celestine’s dark eyes said clearly that Dame Beatrice knew this perfectly well.

‘Splendid,’ said the latter. ‘And you found that some of the food was rather stale, perhaps.’

‘The food, madame?’

Dame Beatrice looked at Margaret.

‘The food?’ she repeated.

‘Eggs, bacon and butter. Other things as well, perhaps, but those, definitely, were mentioned.’

‘There was no food here when we arrived, madame, except that which we had brought with us. That we ate, and then George went to the farm which the agent had described to madame, and bought there the provisions which had been ordered.’

‘There was no parcel or basket of food in the porch or on the back step when you arrived?’

‘But no, madame. There was, however, a half-full tea-pot and two cups and saucers left beside the sink, as though some persons had taken tea together and had left the house without doing the washing-up.’

‘Had left the house? How long before you arrived?’

‘Oh, but I could not say, madame. Two or three days, perhaps. The tea in the pot was quite stale and the dregs in the cups were dried up.’

‘Were there any other signs that the house had been entered before your arrival?’

‘But no, madame, not the *house*. I think I would have noticed any other signs. There were no crumbs on the table and no unwashed plates. Nothing but the tea had been taken. Those who had drunk it were either very careless or were in a great hurry to depart.’

‘What did you make of all this?’

‘It was not for me to speculate upon it, madame, but it seemed to me that a tenant, such as yourself, had given up the house at the end of a holiday, and had left in a hurry to catch the boat.’

‘Of course. What else could you think? Perhaps you concluded that the food which was left had been ordered by this tenant to take home with her.’

‘But I am assuring madame that no food was left here. However, there is one more thing, if madame will pardon me. Some peasant of the island had killed a

pig on the tiles outside the kitchen door. My *mari* and I found the carcass there.'

'A pig?'

'The carcass was there, as I say, madame, and a great deal of blood beneath it and around. Henri buried the carcass — he had need of doing so because of the flies, you understand. Madame will well believe that we also scrubbed and washed the tiles outside the kitchen door. Madame will find no traces of this bestial occurrence.'

'Forensic will,' said Laura, *sotto voce*.

'Thank you, Celestine. And that is all you can tell us?' said Dame Beatrice.

'That is all, madame.'

'Interesting,' said Dame Beatrice. 'All the blood was under and around the dead animal, you say?'

'Precisely, madame.'

'Well, this begins to hot up,' said Laura, when the servant had gone. 'We may take it that the dead pig was a blind. Wonder whether it's of any use to ask at the hotel whether anybody heard a pig being killed on that particular Wednesday?'

'Of no use at all,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Nobody will have heard anything. These are islanders and clannish. I agree with you that a deception had been practised, but we shall not be told by whom.'

'You mean the pig was killed elsewhere and the carcass and a bucket of blood brought here to cover up the bloodstains left by the murder of Eliza Chayleigh, don't you? Pity Celestine washed away the evidence. Still the forensic people might make something of it. Wonder whose pig it was? If the police can find that out, it would be a pretty good pointer to the murderer. Trouble is, I expect that, as you say, these islanders are too clannish to give one another away, especially if murder is involved.'

'That might be the very reason they might be persuaded to talk, I think,' said Sebastian. 'One thing: it looks as though the murder was premeditated. My aunt was sent here, and I bet the dead pig and the rest of it were on the spot, ready for the cover-up. What an absolutely beastly business it all is! Who on earth can have hated my aunt so much? It sounds as though Miss Crimp is involved.'

'Miss Crimp is the likeliest, I suppose,' said Margaret, 'if we are going to mention names. If Aunt Eliza left the hotel, or, rather, her share of it, to her partner, it might offer a motive, don't you think? But it's really much too horrible to talk about. Father will have to tell the police and let them deal with it. There is nothing we can do on our own, is there?'

‘What I mean to do,’ said Sebastian, ‘is to hire Dimbleton’s boat and have a look at those rocks where my aunt’s body was found. I agree there’s been dirty work, and I’d like to find out more about it.’

‘You’re too young to be drowned,’ said Laura. ‘Look, I can think of a much better way of going about things, if you really intend to go ahead with a spot of investigation. If I were you I’d chuck the idea of the boat trip. It won’t bring home the guilt to any extent that will satisfy you.’

‘What do you suggest, then?’ asked Sebastian. ‘By the way, my father has gone home on this afternoon’s boat, so nothing we do now will concern him. There’s no bother on that score.’

‘I suggest,’ said Laura, ‘that we mobilise these bird-watchers. They have ropes, cameras, climbing things and heads for heights. The cliffs are their natural haunt. Get them on the job and make them report back to you. I myself could bear to know a bit more about what happened. It’s obvious your aunt met somebody at this house. What we’ve heard has interested me very much. What’s more, I’ve talked to some of these naturalists and, if you think well of the scheme, I can put you in touch with a small party of the best of them. Let *them* do the exploring from the face of the cliffs.’

‘But we wanted to see for ourselves,’ protested Margaret.

‘Much better leave it to the experts and let them do the donkey work. There’s another aspect, too, which, it appears, has already occurred to you. The police are apt to take a dim view of amateurs like yourselves who horn in on their preserves, whereas these bird-watchers are neither to hold nor to bind. Nobody is going to ask what *they’re* up to if they’re spotted climbing the cliffs and scrambling over the rocks and generally infesting the scenery. It will merely be assumed that they are about their lawful occasions and they’ll be left alone to get on with whatever breakneck expeditions they choose to embark on.’

Margaret looked at her brother. Sebastian nodded.

‘It makes good sense to me,’ he said. ‘When do we make contact?’

‘Well,’ remarked Dame Beatrice, when the young people had gone, ‘I must admit that your methods excite my admiration and envy.’

‘Oh, I intend to hire the boatman myself later on,’ said Laura. ‘He won’t suspect me, but he might think the police ought to be informed if close relatives of the deceased want to go in his craft to take a look at the spot marked X, don’t you think? After all, we’re now certain the woman was murdered. Another point: is it of any use, after this lapse of time, to subject this house to scrutiny of a more meticulous kind than so far we have accorded it? I regard it as a matter of more

than passing interest that Mrs Chayleigh doesn't seem to have been seen alive since she toddled over here with, or without, the viands. To my mind, the pig clinches matters. She was killed by that knock on the head, the pig's blood was poured over *her* blood, and the pig left as a material witness while her body was flung into the sea. Be interesting to find out where, and I want to take a look-see.'

'Very well, then: it shall be as you wish. By the way...' Dame Beatrice fixed her sharp black eyes on Laura. '... I rely on you to see that your proposed boat-trip does not deprive me of my secretary and amanuensis. The *Memoirs* would suffer sadly without the assistance of your memory and imagination.'

'Oh, I'll be all right, and the chap won't risk getting his boat bashed in, that's for certain. We shall keep well off-shore and I shall rely on my binoculars to pick up any items of interest.'

'That may, or may not, help the enquiry. What I should like to find out is what inducement was offered to Mrs Chayleigh which brought her to this house on the flimsy pretext of delivering a basket or parcel of food.'

'Miss Crimp may have suggested that it was on her way to the boat, so if the maid was right, and Eliza agreed to come here, Miss Crimp can't be concerned in the murder,' said Laura, 'because she remained at the hotel.'

'We are in no position to name the murderer, in any case, but Mrs Chayleigh could have been *followed* here, you know. There was an interval while two people drank tea.'

'Do you think it was Eliza and her murderer who drank the tea?'

'Eliza and one of her murderers, you mean. What interests me is the flimsy reason for the errand which seems to have been given. One would have supposed that so trivial a commission could have been given to one of the hotel servants. Mrs Chayleigh must have expected to meet somebody here, but the probability is that we shall never find out who it was.'

CHAPTER TEN

Boat and Scramble

‘Your stormy chiding stay;
Let zephyr only breathe,
And with her tresses play,
Kissing sometimes these purple ports of death.’

William Drummond



Dame Beatrice, who had boundless faith in Laura's ability to take care of herself and who, in any case, was convinced that the young (among whom she still included her secretary) should be given a free hand so long as it was not one which dealt trouble to other people, made no objection and offered no opposition to the proposed expedition.

Laura laid her plans carefully. She was anxious (and kind-hearted and tactful enough) not to allow the brother and sister to know that she proposed to follow a course against which she had persuaded them. She had also decided to make the sea-trip before she looked for clues on the cliff-top.

Sebastian and Margaret, ignoring their father's advice, had gone off to see Ransome as soon as they left *Puffins*. Laura, having seen them on their way, climbed the knoll at the back of the house and kept them in view long enough to note that they had by-passed the hotel and were taking the road to the farm. Upon this, she took the cliff road down to the landing stage. Two or three fishing-boats were drawn up on the disconsolate shore and a little further up the coast the surf was thundering on to the unpromising-looking beach. The mainland away to the south was clearly defined in the late afternoon sunshine, and on the cliff to her left stood the modern lighthouse which guarded the channel.

Among the fishing boats was the malodorous little launch which ferried passengers to and from the mainland steamer, and near it, but anchored off-shore, was a bigger and better boat, a sea-going cruiser, the craft, in fact, which belonged to that Saint Christopher of churchgoers, J. Dimbleton. Having brooded upon its possibilities, Laura climbed the cliff and, keeping an eye open for Sebastian and his sister, she, too, followed the road.

J. Dimbleton's cottage was near the church and stood alone in an overgrown garden containing an empty pig-sty, otherwise the only concession to tidiness and utility was in the form of a small vegetable patch near the dwelling. Laura pushed open a remarkably well-oiled gate and walked up to the cottage, trusting that at that hour Dimbleton would be at home and having his tea. She hammered on the front door with her fist and, like Goldilocks at the home of the three bears, lifted the latch and walked in.

Three persons were seated at a scrubbed wooden table and were indeed at tea. Father Bear she took to be Dimbleton himself, a big, sun-and-wind-tanned man wearing a blue jersey and a spotted neckerchief. Baby Bear was a slim young fellow in a reefer jacket and Mother Bear was Miss Crimp. They stared at Laura, but not malevolently, and Dimbleton stood up and came round the table to where she was standing.

'Business?' he asked. 'Or would ee like a cup o' tea. Made it for Miss Crimp, never touch the poison myself.'

'Business,' Laura replied. 'Tomorrow at dawn, if you will be so good.'

'You want to cross over first thing in the morning?'

'No. I want to make a circular tour of the island.'

'Oh, ay? Anybody going with you?'

'No. My employer, on whose behalf I shall be making this survey, is not enthusiastic about rough sea-trips. She has read that this island used to be the haunt of smugglers, but she claims that landing cargo on these shores would have been too hazardous an undertaking to be feasible, and she wishes to prove her point in an article to a geographical magazine to which, from time to time, she contributes. I am to ask what you charge for the hire of your boat for such a trip.'

'Oh, well, let me see now. You see, for the round trip I usually reckon on half-a-dozen passengers, and that come cheaper for each one of 'em, like.'

'My employer does not wish me to be distracted. I shall be making notes, you see, and must remain undisturbed, so I am to make the trip on my own. She will meet any reasonable demand for a fee.'

'Well, I dunno. What would you say to two pound fifty? *I'll* be going with you to handle the boat, of course.'

'Make it two pounds. There won't be nearly as much wear and tear on your boat as there would be with six passengers, some of them, perhaps, sea-sick.'

'You wouldn't be sea-sick?'

'No. Besides, I could crew for you if necessary.'

‘Two pound, then. Let’s wet it with a drop o’ Scotch.’

‘Right. And a small rake-off for me if I *do* crew for you.’

Dimbleton laughed and the young man at the table said, ‘You’ve caught a right one there, Jake.’

Miss Crimp said, ‘Well, if that’s all right about the fish, then, Mr Dimbleton, perhaps Mrs Gavin and I might walk back together, as our ways lie in the same direction.’

‘It was the fishiest set-up you ever saw,’ said Laura to Dame Beatrice when she had left Miss Crimp at the hotel and had returned to *Puffins*. ‘She mentioned fish, incidentally, but I bet those particular fish were never taken out of either fresh or salt water.’

‘Your figure of speech eludes me.’

‘Fish,’ explained Laura, ‘is one of the Americanisms for money. If you ask *me*, smuggling is still a gainful occupation on this island. The young chap at the table wore gold rings in his ears and was a Cornishman. He was absolutely cut out for the part and so is Dimbleton, who can’t possibly make a living merely by hiring out his boat at odd times. He *must* have another source of income. I had a squint at his boat before I went to his cottage, and it’s a three-thousand pound job, put it at the lowest, and could have cost three times that much, if he bought it new. You could cross to America in it, I shouldn’t wonder, and I bet it’s fast, too. However, I’ll be able to assess it better when I go aboard. It begins to look as though there is method in Gavin’s madness in sending us here, after all.’

‘What else had Miss Crimp to say?’

‘Nothing more while I was in the cottage, except that she proposed to walk back with me.’

‘And then she conversed with you?’

‘Yes, about witches. Asked me whether I knew there was a coven on the island. I pleaded ignorance of any such thing, but said I *had* noticed some red paint splashed over one or two of the headstones in the churchyard, and I asked, in my innocent way, whether that was the doing of the witches. At this she waxed shrill and indignant and stated that the coven operated only for good, and that desecration of tomb-stones had no part whatever in its ritual. She added, though, that she knew vandalism was rampant on the mainland and she supposed that at some time it had been brought to Great Skua through the agency of some of the visitors. She hinted that she suspected two women, but she did not disclose any names.’

‘Did she say whether she herself is a member of the coven?’

‘I didn’t think I’d better ask her, and she didn’t volunteer the information, but she seemed to know a good deal about its doings, if that’s anything to go by, but I don’t think it is. I expect she only picks up gossip from the staff at the hotel.’

At dawn on the Friday morning, Laura slipped out of the house and went down to the landing stage. Dimbleton was there with a tiny dinghy. He rowed her out to the cruiser, they hoisted the dinghy aboard and, rounding the long promontory, turned northward up the west coast.

The dark cliffs exhibited a scowling, perpendicular face of savage grandeur and, although Dimbleton kept the boat well out, Laura could see that in the tiny bays which were part natural, part man-made by the quarrymen, it would be possible to run a small boat in if the pilot knew the coast. More exciting still, after they had passed the quarries and were approaching the old lighthouse from whose gallery the body of Eliza had first been sighted, caves began to appear, yawning black holes in the foot of the awe-inspiring, towering cliffs.

She exchanged no words with the skipper. He sat at the wheel and she was perched forward on the cabin top with her rubber-soled shoes pressed against the starboard rail and her notebook open on her knee. They passed the old lighthouse and then the mouth of the river in its deep gorge and, some way further on, came inshore a little to wave to the keepers of the modern lighthouse which guarded the north-west promontory.

They rounded this and, coming southward along the east coast where the cliffs, although formidably grand, lacked the terrifying authority of those on the Atlantic side, Dimbleton spoke for almost the first time.

‘Up there,’ he said, jerking his head, ‘be the remains of homes made three thousand and more years ago.’ Laura nodded. She had explored the island thoroughly in her days of occupation, usually after her early-morning swim, and was sufficiently versed in archaeology to recognise primitive hut-circles. She had found two groups of these perched on the windy plateau between the north-east point and the two swift-flowing little brooks which flowed eastward out of the great combe. Almost opposite the combe was a stack of tall, ragged rocks, part of the island before some natural cataclysm had created the combe and left some indestructible granite in the form of a hazard so dangerous to shipping that a light-ship was anchored half-a-mile to the east of the rocks to warn vessels of their proximity.

There were caves on this side of the island, too, as Laura carefully noted, particularly under the higher and more formidable cliffs on which was the disused lighthouse which Sebastian and Margaret had visited on their first survey

of the island and which they had found locked against them. It was built on the southernmost of the south-east promontories and once the boat had passed it and had rounded the point and brought the modern lighthouse into focus, the low shores of the landing-place came into view and a few minutes later Dimbleton dropped anchor, lowered the dinghy and rowed Laura ashore.

‘Get what you wanted for your notebook?’ he asked, with kindly good humour. ‘You’re a grand sailor; I’ll say that for you. Get wet, did you, when we shipped a few off that northwest corner?’

‘Not to notice,’ Laura replied. ‘Anyway, your money was in a waterproof pouch. Here you are, and thanks very much for the trip. That’s a fine boat you have. Must have set you back a bit, didn’t it?’

‘Oh, she’s syndicated. My partners put up most of the money. Couldn’t have afforded her myself. She’s a lovely little job, though, ain’t she?’

Laura agreed, made no reference to the partners he had mentioned and, having parted from him with a handshake, she climbed the cliff road back to a very late breakfast. Dame Beatrice had waited so that they might have it together.

‘And how did you get on?’ she asked, spreading honey on a thin slice of bread and butter while Laura, with a gusto which never failed to fascinate her employer, wolfed eggs, rashers, sausages, toast and fried tomatoes. ‘Did you enjoy your trip?’

‘Yes, marvellous! Dimbleton may be a smuggler—I’m more sure of it than ever, now that he’s told me his boat is the property of a syndicate—but he’s a very decent sort and knows how to handle his cruiser in choppy seas—and choppy I’ll say they were.’

‘Did you manage to get a glimpse of the place where the body was found?’

‘Not a very satisfactory one, but I’ll know a lot more when I get the bird-watchers on the job later on this morning. I’ve got an idea about it all, but I don’t know whether it will work out. Anyway, the police will have thought of it, too. I haven’t a doubt about that. Well, the landing-boat from the steamer was in pretty early on Thursday of last week, so I’d better sneak out and make my descent of the cliffs while those Lovelaine kids are still in the hotel. I’m rather surprised that their father is leaving them behind, but I suppose he thinks they’re old enough to look after themselves, and so, of course, they are.’

What, to Sebastian, would have been a hazardous exploit, was to Laura, an experienced rock-climber who had done the ‘Pinnacle Route’ on Sgurr-nan-Gilleann and the west traverse to the top of Bruach-na-Frithe, nothing in

particular. Nevertheless, she did not believe in taking chances, especially on cliffs and rocks she did not know, so she had enlisted the aid of two sturdy young men and two girls with whom she had struck up an acquaintance in the bar of the hotel and arranged for them to act as watchmen willing to go for help if she got stuck or had an accident.

She met her helpers at the appointed time and at the appointed place, but apparently the word had gone round that an assault on the cliffs of the terrifying west side was to be attempted, for at least a dozen of the younger ornithologists were assembled at the trysting-place anxious to witness the hazardous feat.

Laura, naturally, had not given her real reason for wishing to make the descent. She stated that she had seen seals on the flat rocks at the base of the cliff, and she also confessed to a desire to watch the plunging guillemots who would make the four-hundred-foot dive from the top of the cliffs for fish, plummeting down with boldness and accuracy in one of the most spectacular sights to be seen on the bird-haunted island.

As soon as she began the downward scramble seawards, she realised that it was not going to be too difficult, after all.

Although, looked down on from above, the face of the cliff appeared to be sheer and wall-like, she found plenty of foot and hand-holds and, after a month of unexpectedly dry weather, there was not much chance of her slipping. Owing to years of experience of rock-climbing and mountaineering in Scotland, Laura had a great head for heights, but she knew better than to look down until she guessed that she must be getting near the foot of the cliffs. As she disturbed them, sea-birds wheeled and screamed, and, adding a threatening bass to their discordant shrieking, the sea below her snarled and thundered as it hurled itself against the immovable granite.

Thirty feet above the waterline she came to an outcrop of rock which made a convenient ledge. On it she rested for a while and turned to look down at the sea. As she watched the waves crashing against the foot of the cliffs, she could see that a rocky shelf ran out some way into the water. It was similar to the shelf off the bathing beach at the southern end despite the water-waves which broke on it so threateningly, it had a friendly appearance which Laura recognised.

Where she was standing, her back against the cliff-face, clumps of sea-pinks were growing. To Laura they formed a welcome landmark. She had not climbed down the cliff vertically, but had been edging gradually away to her right, and she knew from her survey through field-glasses of the terrain, as it disclosed itself from Dimbleton's boat, that she must be almost directly above the cave she

had seen as a black hole in the cliff. The rocks among which Eliza Chayleigh's body had been found were also well within view and were not far from the mouth of the cave.

'Good thinking,' said Laura, self-approvingly. 'Now to get into the cave.'

This proved to be the most difficult part of the undertaking. She scrambled to within four feet of the water and was immediately drenched with spray and half-deafened by the noise of the waves as the incoming tide flung the whole of its force at the granite fortress of the Atlantic coast of the island. Disregarding all this, she worked her way, precariously but with great caution, still further to her right. Here the rocks which had harboured the body were taking the full force of the assault, so at one place the water did no more than cream in over the island shelf. Laura decided to chance her luck. She got within two feet of the water at this quieter point, glanced down, watched the retreating wave, dropped in, and the next oncoming breaker washed her into the cave.

'Shouldn't want Gavin to see me do that,' she thought, as she floundered forward into the darkness and found the water getting shallower. 'Wonder whether my torch still works?' Realising that, even if she did not need to enter the water, she must inevitably be soaked by the spray when she reached the foot of the cliffs, Laura had wrapped her electric torch in a bit of oil-skin and buttoned it in the zipped pocket of the waterproofed anorak she was wearing. Scrambling onward into the cave and at last finding that her feet were on dry sand, she got out the torch and switched it on.

'I went back to my gang on the top of the cliff,' said Laura, reporting to Dame Beatrice on her return to *Puffins*, 'and mighty surprised they were when I came upon them from the rear. They'd seen me drop into the water and disappear and the girls said they were a bit worried, but the boys, after their easygoing masculine manner, said I'd be all right and the girls were not to panic. They were going to give me an hour and then, if I didn't show up, they would raise the alarm. Well, I found that the water only comes about halfway up the cave. After that it's quite dry and, of course, being another of these smugglers' hidey-holes, there's a way out from the back. The ladder I found is pretty new and on the sand there's a scuffle of footprints in the form of an almost perfect circle. If you ask me,' concluded Laura impressively, 'the cave is now the meeting-place of the witches and witches may be the smugglers. What do you say to that?'

'Imaginative, ingenious, inspired and, of course, quite probable.'

'I'll tell you another thing, although it will change the subject. Dimbleton has

an empty pig-sty in his garden.'

'The trouble will be to find out when last he had a pig in it. But to revert to the smuggling, if it is what Robert and the others suspect, what can be gained by it?'

'Well, there don't seem to be any coastguards, so supposing the goods are not so much smuggled *into* the island as *out* of it? Gun-running to some trouble spot somewhere, for instance? No bother about getting the things either in or out, you see, and a fat profit at the other end.'

'There I admit that you open up an avenue for thought.'

'I guessed perhaps I might,' said Laura, squinting modestly down her nose. 'Of course, all the islanders must be implicated. You couldn't risk having informers.'

'But what has all this to do with the death of Eliza Chayleigh?'

'I have no idea. But don't you think my theory about the empty sty needs following up?'

'Your ideas are always picturesque.'

'And bear no relation to reality, I suppose!'

'Reality is always relative, dear child. So far as the death of Mrs Chayleigh is concerned, I think first we must find out *why* she died, for we must remember that, so far, we cannot be *certain* that she was murdered.'

'But you think she was, don't you?'

'It is as likely and as unlikely as that she committed suicide or was killed as the result of an accident, but I prefer to await the result of the inquest before I make up my mind.'

'Meaning,' said Laura shrewdly, 'that you don't propose to be bound by its findings. Is that your attitude?'

'I have no more to say. Speculation is useless at the moment.'

'Then shall we get on with the memoirs?'

'I should prefer to take the air. Will you show me whereabouts on the cliff-top the bolt-hole from this cave comes out? I do not propose to scramble down the face of the cliffs as you did, but your 'fairly new' ladder sounds a possible means of descent, even for one of my advanced years.'

'Well, all right, so long as we get back in time for our next meal. So you *do* think this was murder, and not accident or suicide, don't you? I wish we knew why she really consented to come to this house and who it was she met here. Incidentally, the passage up from the back of the cave comes out at the end of the quarries, so one way of reaching it, if you wanted to throw people off the scent,

might be to start from the back of this house, worm your way into the quarries and approach the entrance to the passage that way. You'd never be spotted unless somebody was actually in the quarries at the time, because they're all overgrown with plants and small bushes and so there's plenty of cover. My bet is not only that Mrs Chayleigh was conned into coming to this house and murdered here, but that the body was taken to the cave and put into the sea on an outgoing tide. What do you think of that for an idea? There must have been more than one murderer, of course. That's why I thought of the smugglers. I don't believe one person could have managed all that alone.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Witches' Cavern

'Dame, dame! the watch is set:
Quickly come, we all are met.
From the lakes and from the fens,
From the rocks and from the dens,
From the woods and from the caves,
From the churchyards, from the graves...'

Ben Jonson



What made you think that the cave had a second exit?' Dame Beatrice asked as they climbed the knoll at the back of *Puffins*.

'There's a similar way up out of the cave I use as a bathing hut. There may be others on the island, for all I know, and there's also a deep gorge which goes halfway across the island where the stream runs. This place must have been a smugglers' paradise at one time and I believe it still is. Stuff comes in from the Continent, or further east, and goes out to Ireland and maybe to Cuba, or it comes in from America and goes out to the Middle East. There are all sorts of possibilities and apparently, on the island itself, no restriction. But the smugglers can wait for a bit, don't you think? I feel that our immediate concern is with the death of Eliza Chayleigh.'

From the top of the knoll a well-trodden path led to the top of the old quarries. These had been so long untouched that they were pleasantly overgrown by climbing plants, bracken, heather and wild flowers. For fifty yards or so Laura still followed the path and this kept to the line of the old railway track, which also sprouted wild plants, grass and gorse-bushes. When they came to the end of it against a huge pile of rubble and discarded blocks of stone, a further path led along the cliff-top towards the old lighthouse. Here Laura stood still.

'Now the fun begins,' she said. 'Oh, damn! We've got company.'

The company to which she referred was that of Sebastian and Margaret, who greeted her as they came towards her from the direction of the old lighthouse. Dame Beatrice leered at them kindly and asked how they did.

'Well,' said Margaret, when they had returned her salutation, 'I'm glad we

met you. Mrs Gavin—Laura—there's a marvellous story going around among the bird-watchers at the hotel that you climbed down the cliffs on the end of a rope, took it off and left it dangling and came up by another route. We thought that could only mean you'd found another cave like the one we use for bathing. Do show us the exit. We've looked everywhere.

'Another smugglers' hole, in fact, it is. Quite right,' said Laura. 'I'm going to show it to Dame Beatrice. So you want to come along? All right, then. But I had no rope.'

Behind the heap of stone and rubble there were bushes. Laura parted these and held them apart for Dame Beatrice to follow her before she plunged into a sea of bracken through which a narrow path led away to the left and fairly steeply downwards.

'Mind how you go,' she said. 'There are chunks of stone and all sorts of rubbish down here, but I think we're pretty well hidden from view from up top.'

Dame Beatrice thought so, too. The sides of the quarry, although they were not precipitous, were steep and almost perpendicular, but the reason for Laura's assumption was the dense growth of vegetation, chiefly gorse, bracken and small hawthorn bushes, which covered the sides. Even the sky, except for the blue slit directly above their heads, was seen through a maze of green and gold.

It was rough going and they took it slowly. The quarry broadened out and became a square instead of a narrow rectangle. Laura plunged across it and on the seaward side there was an opening from which crudely-hacked steps descended to a tunnel.

'This is where I came out,' Laura explained, 'and quite pleased to see a spot of daylight, I don't mind telling you.' She produced a torch and switched it on. 'I reckon the quarrymen were in cahoots with the smugglers and between them they blasted this passage down to the sea.' It led downwards fairly steeply and Sebastian, who was bringing up the rear behind his sister and Dame Beatrice, estimated that they must have covered more than half-a-mile before Laura said, in tones that reverberated, 'You'd all better stand still for a minute. The last bit is a ladder. It's quite firm, but we have to go one at a time. I'm going down now, and I'll light the rest of you.'

The ladder, an extremely steady and stable affair, as Laura had indicated, consisted of only a dozen rungs. When all four explorers were on the sandy floor of the cave, Laura cast the beam of her torch around and they could see, on the dry floor, the shuffled outline of a circle.

'Your surmise that the island witches use the cave seems to be borne out by

the evidence,' said Dame Beatrice, who had also produced a torch.

'Perhaps folk-dancers practise down here,' said Margaret, giggling nervously because she found the echoing surroundings eerie.

'Folk-dancers,' said Dame Beatrice, 'do not usually place candles at the four cardinal points of the compass.'

She walked round the outside of the scuffled circle. Plainly to be seen in the light of her powerful torch were the marks of four sets of candle-droppings. Then she led the way towards the mouth of the cave, but kept well back from the edge of the water. Here she and Laura switched off their torches, for it was brilliantly sunny over the sea. The force of the waves, as Laura previously had discovered, was broken on the series of black rocks which stood about ten yards out and among which the corpse of Eliza Chayleigh had been caught and held. Dame Beatrice, after studying the scene for several minutes, during which none of the others disturbed her thoughts, turned away and said decisively.

'I do not think Mrs Chayleigh's body was ever in this cave.'

'No?' said Laura. 'But it would have been so easy. Knock a person on the head in our present dwelling, get the body into the quarries, cart it down here—you'd be screened all the time, once you got into the quarries—heave the body into the water from the mouth of the cave on an out-going tide, and there you are.'

'Yes, that sounds feasible, I know. My objection is this: those rocks where the body was found constitute a natural barrier to the force of the incoming tide.'

'Granted.'

'They also act as a foil to the outgoing tide. There is never sufficient strength in the ebb to carry a body beyond those rocks and out to sea.'

'Well, we know that's true, so what?'

'The people who know of this cave must be dwellers on the island, I think. If that is so, they must be well aware of the point we have just raised. They would know that the body would get caught up among the rocks and that, when it did, it would be seen from the old lighthouse and also from the cliff-top. They might just as well have left the body in the cave.'

'With all those witches, or whatever, coming down here to hold their meetings?'

'Well, but the witches would equally well have seen the body caught up among the rocks. It seems to me that the murderer's most sensible plan would be to get the body carried out to sea and for it to remain in the water long enough to become unrecognisable. The fact that the body got caught up among rocks

makes me wonder whether the murderer (and I am not necessarily assuming that Mrs Chayleigh was killed and disposed of by only one person) was a stranger to the island and not a native of the place, otherwise surely he would have allowed for the rocks and the tides.'

'It could have been a witchcraft plot, you know,' said Laura. 'Had you thought of that?'

Dame Beatrice cackled.

'Do you mean that the whole coven was in a plot to rid the world of poor Eliza Chayleigh?' she asked.

'Well, I'm keeping an open mind,' declared Laura, stoutly. 'Has everybody seen enough? I'm getting hungry.'

They were about to return by the way they had come when Margaret murmured,

'I think there's somebody coming.' Instinctively she flattened herself against the dark wall of the cave and, such is the herd instinct, her brother and Laura did the same. Dame Beatrice remained where she was. From the top of the ladder came an oath and it was followed by a woman's voice saying in frightened tones:

'Somebody down there!'

'No matter. Just carry on,' said a man. 'It'll only be some of the bird-watchers and they're innocent and harmless enough.'

'Yes, do come down. Don't mind me,' said Dame Beatrice, her beautiful voice echoing oddly around the cavern.

'Out of the way, then, ma'am. Us be carrying a table and that,' said one of the women, 'and it's kind of ockard on this here ladder.'

One after another, five persons climbed down the ladder into the cave, Dame Beatrice politely lighting their descent with her torch. In silence they stacked what they were carrying against the back wall of the cave. There was only one man. Of the women, one was young, the others middle-aged. In illuminating their labours Dame Beatrice also contrived to shine her torch into their faces and was rebuked by the woman who had already spoken to her.

'Keep that torch out of my eyes, and thank you kindly,' she said, curtly but not offensively. 'Tis a powerful light and makes me go quite blind.'

'Oh, I do beg your pardon,' said Dame Beatrice, who had seen as much as was necessary. 'Do tell me, are you preparing for a picnic?'

'Ay, you might call it that, then.'

'But where is the food?'

'Coming later,' said the man briefly.

‘You won’t tell nobody as you’ve seen us, like, will you?’ said the woman. ‘Don’t want interlopers. Some of they tourists would be all over us if they thought there might be a free supper.’

‘How did you get into the cave, may I ask?’ said the man, who, from his accent, was not an islander.

‘Largely by chance. I have rented *Puffins*, the house near the hotel, and I found, in traversing the old quarries, the entrance to a passage which brought me ultimately to the ladder and this cave.’

‘Do you usually carry an electric torch with you?’

‘Almost invariably when I am exploring. I read that the island used to be the haunt of smugglers, so I expected to find caves, you see.’

‘Oh, yes? Well, look, you better be off home now, ma’am,’ said the woman. She spoke in a tone of authority and gave the impression that she was the leader of the party. ‘Us ’ud be greatly obliged if we could have the place to ourselves, to finish our preparations, like, as there’s much to be done. Up the ladder with ee, and us’ll foller suit. Don’t want to put ee about, like, but we’ve sort of made this our meetin’ place over the years, so, if it’s all the same—’

‘You wish me to precede you? Very well.’

Hoping that the woman meant what she said and that the party really did intend to make the ascent behind her and leave the way clear for the Lovelaines and Laura to follow as soon as the coast was clear, Dame Beatrice climbed the ladder and made her way along the narrow passage to the open air. She emerged and took the path towards *Puffins*. The party of five were not far behind her. She looked round when she lost the sound of them, and was pleased to see that they had turned away from her, and were taking the way which would lead them towards the old lighthouse. When they were but of sight she stood still and waited for the others. It was a quarter of an hour before they emerged.

‘Thought we’d better give those people plenty of time to get away, as they didn’t know we were there,’ said Laura. ‘You certainly gave them the benefit of your torch. Did you recognise any of them?’

‘I didn’t,’ said Sebastian. ‘Did you, Maggie?’

‘I knew one of them. Surely you remember the church cleaner who showed you the black-magic ladder in the tower?’

‘Oh, good gracious, yes! She was the woman who seemed to do most of the talking. I’m a bit puzzled, though. They didn’t seem the sort of people who would want to picnic in a dark cave.’

‘Judging by the paraphernalia they brought with them,’ said Dame Beatrice,

‘I fancy they were no ordinary picnic party. I imagine that, after they had gone, you took the opportunity of examining what they had left behind them?’

‘Yes. Laura had a torch. There was a long, narrow board which could be used as a table-top, two trestles to rest it on, a very well-laundered tablecloth and a big, rather terrifying knife with one straight edge and one slightly curved cutting-edge. We could make out some curious-looking marks on the handle—an inscription of some sort—but we couldn’t translate the characters.’

‘Yes, that was all,’ said Laura.

‘No doubt they’ll bring the rest of the ritual articles later -maybe not until tonight, then,’ said Sebastian.

‘The food, do you mean?’ asked his sister.

‘No,’ replied Sebastian, looking questioningly at Dame Beatrice and receiving a nod of approval. ‘I mean chalk, salt, fresh water, a ceremonial sword, a censer and probably some kind of whip or scourge.’

‘Good heavens! What on earth for?’

‘A witchcraft session, of course. That chap on my staircase—the one I think I’ve told you about—mentioned things he knew, and, of course, I recognised what kind of knife it was which we saw.’

‘Yes,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I fancy there will be a meeting of the coven tonight. The only thing which surprises me is that they brought the *athame*, that ritual knife, with them. It is to them a sacred object.’

‘It’s exciting and rather horrible to think of them holding midnight orgies in that cave,’ said Margaret, shuddering delightedly.

‘You are mistaken, dear child. There will be nothing horrible and I doubt very much whether there will be what even the wildest flight of imagination could construe as an orgy. The proceedings will be extremely formal, except for the dancing, perhaps. They will be deeply religious (in a non-Christian sense, but devotional, none the less) and probably of a simple ritual nature. The whole ceremony, if these people are white witches, as their cult objects suggest, will be dedicated to the doing of good.’

‘But I thought all witches were supposed to have made a pact with the Devil.’

‘In earlier, less tolerant, more superstitious times, it was thought to be so. A modern witch, however, will tell you that his or her dedication is to the Great Mother and the Horned God. The religion of the witches is a fertility cult and, as such (unless one condemns it as an unforgivable heresy) entirely harmless.’

‘How disappointing!’

‘I am sorry you find it so,’ said Dame Beatrice, solemnly. Somewhat to Sebastian’s surprise, he found himself missing his father’s company at dinner, especially as (so the head-waiter, to whom he had complained, informed him) Miss Crimp had now planted two of the ornithologists at their table. He and his sister went early to their chalet and Margaret, who seemed tired and somewhat out of sorts, went to bed earlier than usual. After about an hour Sebastian followed suit, but found himself wide awake and extremely restless. There was a remedy, however. With no need to alarm or disturb his sister, he could get out into the open air and had done so for one or two nights already when he found himself unable to sleep. On this particular night it was not only sleeplessness which possessed him, but a very lively curiosity. The indications were that the island coven was to meet that very night and although he knew that the ancient reports of the doings of witches were not only exaggerated but were largely untrue, he found himself very curious to find out exactly what did happen on such occasions, particularly as he suspected that this time an extraordinary meeting had been convened.

The candle-droppings which he had seen on the floor of the cave had appeared to him to be comparatively fresh. The last meeting of the coven, therefore, he argued, could not have been held so very long ago. To hold another one so soon, therefore, appeared to indicate that something of importance was in the wind.

He had no idea when the coven was likely to foregather. Shakespeare had caused Macbeth to call his three witches ‘secret, black and midnight hags’ and it seemed to Sebastian that midnight was as good an hour as any other for secret meetings and the casting of spells. On the other hand, darkness, as such, was a reasonable cloak at any hour, and at the beginning of July it would be dark, except for the moon, then almost at the full, at any time after ten at night.

He had no idea, either, of how long the ceremony was likely to last, but he supposed that the coven would break up before dawn. He decided to leave his room at eleven. It would take him the best part of half-an-hour to reach the cave. He had marked a jutting-out part of the cave wall where he thought it would be possible to screen himself even if the witches floodlit the cave, an operation which he deemed unlikely. If they were already in session when he arrived, he thought that, by lying on his stomach at the top of the ladder and peering down the hole into the cave, he would be able to see and hear enough of the proceedings to satisfy his curiosity even if the satisfaction were not justified by any excitement.

He thought he had made his preparations quietly, and so he had, but he reckoned without one thing. It suddenly occurred to him that he would need a torch. He had not brought one with him, but he remembered that Margaret possessed one. He stole into the sitting-room and opened the door which communicated with his sister's room. He had no idea where she kept the torch and he did not want to wake her by putting on the electric light, so he groped his way to the dressing-table and felt for the handles of the top drawer. A loud gasp and a cry of, 'Who's that?' interrupted his manoeuvres.

'It's all right,' he said. 'Where's your torch?'

Margaret switched on the bedhead light.

'What do you want it for?' she asked.

'I'm going out.'

'Let me come with you.'

'Better not. Two of us might be rumbled.'

'Where are you going?'

'To the cave, of course. Where's the torch?'

'Top drawer, right-hand side. Seb, I don't want to be left alone in the chalet.'

'Oh, rot! You'll be all right. Lock your outside door.'

'I always do.'

'Well, I'll lock mine and take my key with me.'

'There are still the windows. Somebody might force them open.'

'Look here, what *is* all this?'

'Oh, Seb, I'm sure Aunt Eliza was murdered, and I'm scared.'

'We don't know yet what happened to her. I expect we'll get a 'phone call from The Tutor as soon as the inquest is over.'

'Please, Seb!'

'Well, what?'

'Don't leave me here alone.'

'Oh, hell! What's biting you? Look, I must go now, or they'll arrive before I'm in position.'

'If you go, I'll follow you. I swear I will.'

'All right, then, shove some clothes on, but you'll queer my pitch, you know.'

'Will you really lock your door if I stay behind?'

'Of course. I should have done so in any case.'

'Well, all right, then. I don't want to spoil your fun. Don't be too long, though, will you?'

Sebastian, having found the torch, made a reassuring promise, went back to his room with a feeling of relief and let himself out, locking the door behind him and trousering the key. He had been out by moonlight before, but never in the direction of the quarries. It was astonishing, he always found, how different everything seemed by night, especially as he did not want to use the torch until he was at the entrance to the cave passage.

The descent into the quarry was tricky, for the moonlight made treacherous shadows, but he reached his objective without disaster, stood in the passage opening for a moment to listen, heard nothing except the muted booming of the sea, switched on the torch and made his way downwards towards the cave.

At the top of the ladder he halted and listened again, but it was plain that the cave was untenanted, so he shut off the torch, pocketed it and groped his way from rung to rung until both his feet were on the floor of the cave. Then he switched the torch on again, found the outcrop of rocky wall about three-quarters of the way towards the sea, settled himself in hiding, and wondered how long he would have to wait for the witches to appear. He also wondered whether they would appear at all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ordeal by Water

‘Hold back thy hours, dark Night, till we have done;
The Day will come too soon.’

Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher



He had timed his arrival pretty well, for he had only just begun to realise that it was very cold in the cave when, above the booming of the sea as it met the edge of the rocky shelf outside, he caught the sound of voices. He peered round the granite wall of his hiding-place, but at first he could see nothing. Then somebody lit a storm lantern and, the participants having entered the cave, the preparations began. The trestle table was set up and covered with the snowy cloth upon whose pristine laundering Margaret had commented.

Ten or more people had climbed down into the cave, but the majority of them remained in shadow while two or three seemed to be making all the preparations. Peering out, Sebastian could make out the dim figures moving to and fro as they placed upon the table what he assumed were ritual objects. Then a woman's voice said,

‘Now all be prepared, so stand you still and be counted.’ She counted up to the number thirteen, but only five of the motionless figures were sufficiently thrown into focus by the lamp-light for Sebastian to decide which of them were men and which were women. ‘Now,’ the woman went on, ‘you what want to take the oath, we hope as you do fully understand what you be taking upon you.’

‘Ay, that do I,’ replied a voice which Sebastian vaguely recognised, although, at the moment, he could not attach to it a name.

‘So long as you be sure. Well, now, let's be at it. But first it behove me to remind him who is to be our new brother to think deep on the things wherefrom spring our belief. The light out, first. I needs to speak in the darkness which seemingly was the world before the old gods made their call and gave us to be their followers.’

In spite of the homely accents and countrified, uncultivated voice, there was something of dignity and feeling in the woman's speech and this impression was

intensified as she went on, her words punctuated by the rhythmic crash of the breakers outside the mouth of the cave and the threatening snarl of the undertow as the waves retreated. Listening to the sounds, Sebastian thought of legions reforming, after an attack, to renew their assault on the island.

‘Us meet in the name of the Earth Mother and of the Hunting God, him of the Three Faces that bear the horns of the moon upon his head. To them, and to our brothers and sisters, be we always honest and true, calling upon the old gods in the words as was taught us from the beginning: Eko, Eko, Azarak. Eko, Eko, Zamelak. Eko, Eko, Eko, Eko, Eko!’

These strange words were repeated with great reverence, and in the low tones of prayer, by the others. Then the priestess went on:

‘Let the circle be consecrated with salt and water and may him as we worships be lord of the dance, as *was* known, and *is* known, and *shall* be known. Herewith I lights up the four candles, marking the north, the south, the east and the west, as is laid down in the Old Book.’

This was done and, by the tall flames which rose straight into the air at the windless end of the cave, Sebastian could see that the rest of the witches had formed a circle and that at some time during the discourse they had all stripped off their clothes and had joined hands around their leader. She was now standing in the centre of the circle, and was robed in white with her dark hair unbound and falling to her shoulders. To add to her air of authority she held a whip in her right hand and a censer in her left and, to the incongruous background music of a gramophone playing the Eton Boating Song, a solemn dance began. The censer swung, attempting to keep time with the music, and the whip flicked about the dancers’ naked bodies, more, it seemed, to encourage them than to do them much injury. The purpose of the bizarre punishment was made clear by the priestess, who, as she ritually whipped the others, intoned:

‘Herewith I drives out unclean spirits from our circle. This for purity—’ flick, ‘purity—’ flick, ‘this to drive away all evil—’ flick, ‘be gone, you foul ones, gone!’

The dance having ended, Sebastian could see that those visible to him in the candle-light were now facing inwards and had their hands crossed on their breasts. It was not so much their nakedness which impressed him as the utter defencelessness it seemed to imply. The priestess, who had discarded the whip and the censer, now received from one of the circle a goblet which gleamed like gold in the candle-light and, for all Sebastian knew, was made of that precious metal. She raised it on high, turning slowly about so that she faced each of the

others in turn, and, intoning the words in the most solemn manner, said:

‘I summon the Mighty Ones. Come, O ye gods who have been since time began! I call you from the north...’ she lowered the chalice as she faced the candle which indicated that point of the compass ‘... the east...’ she turned through the necessary ninety degrees ‘... the south and the west. Ye are the gods of our birth, of our youth, of our flowering and of our death. I summon ye to witness these our rites, and to bless, O Great Ones, your obedient people.’

There was a long pause. At every turn she had made the priestess had taken a sip from the goblet. She now handed it to one of the men and received from him the sacred knife, the *athame*.

‘Let our aspiring brother stand before the altar,’ she said briskly, changing her tone from one of supplication to one of command. She turned to the east again and raised the *athame* on high. The candles turned its polished blade to silver, purple and black, and Sebastian almost convinced himself that he could see great drops of blood beginning to drip from it. Two of the circle moved aside, and, by means of the gap thus made, a man came into the candle-light and stood in front of the altar. His back was towards Sebastian, but the boy had caught sight of his profile as he entered the circle and there was no doubt that the neophyte was Ransome Lovelaine. He was wrapped in what appeared to be an ordinary white sheet.

‘I call upon the gods to accept this new member of our sacred coven,’ said the priestess. ‘May they bless him and make him worthy of the honour which is about to be bestowed upon him. May they seal his lips, that he may never betray our mysteries. May they cleanse his heart, that no evil spirit enter it.’

Having delivered herself of these preliminaries, she stepped up to Ransome and, with one magnificent sweep of her arm, she plucked the white sheet from his shoulders, leaving him as naked as the others. Sebastian wondered how they could all bear the temperature, for he himself, in spite of being warmly clothed, found the cave, into whose depths no sunshine ever penetrated, as cold as the inside of a refrigerator. The coven, however, seemed unaffected, and the ceremony of initiating Ransome proceeded to take what Sebastian supposed was its usual course.

From the altar a small dark piece of cloth was taken and Ransome was blindfolded with it. Then, with every evidence of reverence and propriety, a cord was picked up and exhibited to the worshippers. With it Ransome’s wrists were bound firmly behind his back and the priestess put back the knife and took from the altar a long sword. The cord which tied Ransome’s wrists had also been

passed round his neck and the horrified Sebastian believed that he was about to witness a ritual killing.

Before he could collect himself, however, the fear was dissolved and the moment of horror passed. Ritual was involved, but not ritual murder. The robed priestess presented the point of the gleaming sword at Ransome's breast and again began to intone. She reminded him that he was entering a new life and must solemnly promise to be faithful to it and never to betray its secrets.

At this solemn and impressive moment there was a rude and noisy interruption. Without previous warning—they must have moved like cats along the passage—three men leapt, one after another, down the ladder. Fiercely they fell upon the astonished coven. One seized and flourished the *athame*, the sacred knife which had been replaced on the altar; another flung the priestess to the ground and, as she dropped it, picked up the ceremonial sword. The third man found the scourge and proceeded to lash the naked bodies of the witches, who yelled, shrieked and swore and, seizing any clothes which came nearest to hand, scrambled up the ladder and made off, leaving Ransome, bewildered, bound and blindfolded, still standing helpless in front of the improvised altar.

'What's up? What's happening?' he cried, twisting his naked body against his bonds. The intruders wasted no time in answering him. Producing more cord, one of them stooped and bound his ankles, then the three of them bundled him towards the mouth of the cave and, hooking his bound ankles from under him, precipitated him full length on to the sand with his head towards the sea and his whole body well below the tide mark to which the water would rise. Then, still without having spoken a word, they returned to the ladder and were gone.

Whereas, so far as Sebastian could tell, all the actions of the priestess, however threatening they might appear, had been innocent and symbolic, the intention of the three intruders was plain. Ransome, bound, blindfolded and helpless, was to be left to drown and to suffer the mental torture, moreover, of knowing that in time the encroaching tide would wash around his body and finally engulf him.

There was a picture in Sebastian's mind, a vision of the hapless witches clutching armsful of clothes and fleeing, as their predecessors must have done, from their persecutors. Along the tunnel they must be making their panic flight, then between the dark sides of the overgrown quarry. They must be looking like glimmering ghosts, but, unlike ghosts, they must be conscious of the rough going for their bare feet, and the brambles, nettles and stinging branches of low-growing bushes which tormented their naked bodies as they gasped and

stumbled in the moonlight to a place of safety.

He wondered where they would make for, but, as these thoughts crowded his mind, he saw another picture and, this time, not a mental one. Less than a dozen yards from his hiding-place he could make out the hapless figure of Ransome, bound and blindfolded. He was in the water, but a faint white blur showed that he was at least face-upwards and not, at the moment, in danger of being drowned. Sebastian crept towards the far end of the cave and, at the foot of the ladder, strained his ears. He could hear nothing, so he returned to the prostrate man and felt for the cords which bound him.

‘Never mind that, whoever you are,’ muttered Ransome. ‘Pull me up above the tide-mark. The tide’s on the turn and it comes in fast.’

He was much bigger and heavier than Sebastian, but the boy, seizing him by the ankles, heaved and strained against the resisting sand. Then, as soon as he had pulled Ransome to a place of safety and rolled him over on to his chest, he wrestled and sweated with the knots until at last Ransome was free. Ransome pulled the bandage from his eyes and stood up.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, for Sebastian, so far, had not uttered a word and he could not see him in the darkness. Sebastian told him.

‘Better come back with me to the hotel,’ he said. ‘You’ll be safe enough in my room for the rest of the night.’

‘No, that’s all right. Got a torch, by any chance?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Switch it on while I find my confounded clothes.’

They both looked around, but there were no clothes left in the cave. The witches had snatched up every garment they could lay hands on in their panic.

‘Damn! And I’m frozen!’ said Ransome.

‘Have my jacket. I’ve got a sweater. What are you going to do, then?’

‘Make for my cottage and some trousers.’

‘I could fix you up, I expect.’

‘Couldn’t get into your things. Can’t get into this jacket, for a start.’

‘Have the sweater, then. That will stretch.’ He peeled it off and they made the exchange. ‘I say, what was it all about?’

‘Vigilantes.’

‘Why, what have you been doing?’

‘Nothing. They must think I’m an informer.’

‘Did they really mean you to drown?’

‘Shouldn’t think so. Just a warning, I reckon.’

‘But what could you inform about?’

‘That’s telling, isn’t it? Look, they’ll be back to untie me before the tide’s much higher. Let’s go, while the going’s good.’

‘By the way,’ said Sebastian, ‘is the farmer home again yet? I should like to meet him and his wife.’

‘All in good time,’ said Ransome. ‘*He*’s there, but Lucy still isn’t back.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Unsatisfactory Verdict

‘Ah! woe is me, woe, woe is me,
Alack and well-a-day!
For pity, sir, find out that bee
Which bore my love away.’

Robert Herrick



Margaret heard her brother come in. She opened her bedroom door, crossed the tiny sitting-room and tapped. Sebastian opened his door.

‘Why aren’t you asleep?’ he asked.

‘You made such a row getting in.’

‘You must have been wide awake to hear me.’ She had entered the room and seated herself on the bed, so Sebastian went on: ‘Out of it. I want to get some sleep.’

‘Did you have any fun?’

‘Lots. I’ll tell you all about it in the morning.’

‘Tell me a little bit now.’

‘Couldn’t. It can’t be told in bits. Hop it into your bed and leave me mine.’

‘Where’s your sweater?’ asked Margaret, as he removed his jacket.

‘On Ransome. Now get out of my room or I won’t tell you a thing, either now or in the morning.’

‘It’s the morning now.’

‘I know. I shan’t be in time for breakfast if I don’t get some sleep. Also my trouser-legs are wet, my fingers are sore with undoing a knotted rope and I’m so cold I shall get pneumonia if you don’t get off my bed and let me get into it.’ He began to take off his trousers. Margaret accepted the ultimatum and went back to her own room. She had to wake him in the morning to get him up in time for breakfast.

‘Not a question, I promise you, not one,’ she said, ‘until we’ve got to the toast and marmalade.’

‘And not then, not at the table with those two damned bird-men listening-in

with their ears flapping. What I have to disclose is first for you and then for Laura.'

'Are you hoping she'll pass it on to Dame Beatrice?'

'That is the thought at the back of my tiny mind. Go along to the dining-room and give our usual order. I'll be there by the time they've put it on the table.'

'I say, did you know,' said one of the men who had been allotted to the Lovelaines' table, 'that there's a nudist colony on the island? Somebody saw them last night.'

Sebastian, who had just taken his seat, looked coldly at the questioner and replied:

'No doubt there are a number of other harmless, unnecessary objects on the island. If nudists excite you, you're welcome to them.'

'Thanks for nothing,' said the ornithologist sourly, turning away from Sebastian in a pointed manner.

'You needn't go out of your way to crush the poor things. They're harmless and unnecessary, too,' protested Margaret, when the bird-watchers had finished their breakfasts and had left the table. 'Do you know about the nudists, then?'

'There aren't any. Shut up until we're out of this dining-room. Nudists, in one sense, come into my story, but I can't tell you about it here.'

Meanwhile Marius, having telephoned his wife as soon as he reached the mainland, booked a room at an hotel and prepared himself for what he felt would be the ordeal of attending the inquest on his sister. Of Miss Crimp he had seen nothing once he had left the island. He imagined that she intended to cross by Dimbleton's boat and that, as soon as the inquest was over, she would return immediately by the same means so as to be absent (from what he supposed she now regarded as her own hotel) for as short a period as possible. He himself, he had informed Clothilde on the telephone, would return home as soon as the inquest was over, unless there seemed to be any reason for going back to Great Skua and his children.

Fortunately for those who had to come over from the island to attend it, the inquest was held in the port to which the island steamer put in. When the proceedings opened, Marius found himself seated next to Miss Crimp, who had travelled by the means he had envisaged and who had Dimbleton on the other side of her, for the boatman himself had been called to attend the inquest in his capacity as one of the retrievers of the corpse.

The proceedings opened formally and Miss Crimp gave evidence of the

identity of the body. She was followed by Marius, who, as next of kin to the deceased (nobody had mentioned Ransome), confirmed what Miss Crimp had declared.

‘Were two witnesses necessary?’ asked the coroner, looking at the inspector of police who was in court. The inspector replied that, as the next of kin had been out of touch with the deceased for twenty years, it had been thought better to have his evidence of identification substantiated by a witness who had been closely associated with the deceased for the past two years.

‘But she didn’t confirm *him*; he corroborated *her*,’ said the coroner testily. ‘Oh, well, no matter, no matter. We may need to question both witnesses further, a little later on.’ He called for the medical evidence. This was supplied by the police surgeon. The deceased had met her death as the result of having received a fatal blow on the head. He went into details. There were also a number of contusions on the body and some broken ribs, the witness stated, but these had been sustained after death. It was the head-wound which had done, all the damage.

‘But I thought the body was found in the sea,’ objected the coroner, who had been given this fact before the inquest opened. The police surgeon replied that all the circumstances of death had been fully investigated at the autopsy and that he was able to state with certainty that, although the body had been found in the sea, death was not due to drowning. The coroner, apparently feeling that the jury had had enough of clinical detail, said, ‘Very well, very well. We had better hear from those who found the body.’

Dimbleton took his place in the witness box and, in answer to a question when he had taken the oath, stated that he had not been alone in the rescue boat, but had been told by the police that, as the owner of the craft which had brought the body ashore, he was competent to speak for himself and the rest of the crew.

‘So what do *you* think happened?’ asked the coroner, dropping his former testy manner and speaking as man to man.

‘My thought, sir, is as the poor lady must have been blowed off the cliff-top,’ said Dimbleton stolidly.

‘Blown off the cliff-top? Incredible!’

‘Oh, no, sir, not if you know the force of the wind on Great Skua. It’s no uncommon matter for cows to be blowed off into the sea, and a cow would weigh a lot heavier than the poor lady, I wouldn’t doubt.’

The police surgeon was recalled.

‘Could the fatal injury you have described have been caused by an accidental

fall from the cliffs?’

‘Well, yes, it *could* have been. On the other hand—’

‘You say it *could* have been. Is there any evidence to show that it *wasn't*?’

‘No,’ replied the witness unwillingly, ‘but I am more inclined to think that it was the result of a blow on the head and that this was delivered and was received before the body entered the water.’

‘Yes, the court accepts your evidence that death was not due to drowning, but, judging by the way you have framed your answer, are we to understand that you refer to a deliberate attack?’

‘Oh, no, you must not infer that. There is nothing in my findings to support such a theory,’ said the police surgeon hastily.

‘Still, the jury will wish to have the matter investigated,’ said the coroner coldly.

He investigated it by recalling in turn Miss Crimp, Marius and the boatman. Summed up, their evidence amounted to (Miss Crimp), a vehement assertion that poor Eliza had no enemies and many, many friends; that (Marius) so far as he knew, his sister was not the kind of person to have given offence to anybody (he did not mention his wife); and that (Dimbleton) Mrs Chayleigh was a nice, goodhearted lady who was at odds with nobody and who was generous with hand-outs at Christmas.

‘Granted,’ said the coroner to Dimbleton, ‘that the deceased *was* blown off the cliffs, can you suggest whereabouts on the island this tragic accident could have taken place?’

‘Almost anywhere, sir, in a strong enough wind, but being as she was found caught up in the rocks we calls the Fiddlers, I should reckon she went in near enough by the old quarries and got caught in the current—a regular race, that is, sir—as we calls Dead Man’s Day.’

The jury retired and, strongly advised by the coroner, brought in an open verdict. The inspector met the doctor later and remarked that the coroner was an old ass who had rushed the case through because he was going yachting and wanted to catch the tide, but that he (the inspector) did not intend to let the case drop.

‘Glad to hear it,’ said the police surgeon. ‘If the thing ever gets as far as the magistrates, I’ll get a chance, perhaps, to air the opinion which I wasn’t allowed to voice—namely, that it is a great deal more likely that somebody knocked her on the head and threw the body into the sea, than that the wind blew her over the cliff. That’s a tale I really cannot swallow, especially considering the nature of

the head-wound. Besides, she'd never have risked being blown off a cliff. She'd lived on the island for years, and she was a middle-aged woman and cautious, I imagine.'

'I wonder whether anybody stood to gain anything by her death? That's the first thing which needs looking into,' said the inspector to the local superintendent when they, in their turn, were discussing the inquest. 'You know, sir, I wouldn't trust that partner of hers, that Crimp woman, further than I could see her. She's a creep.'

'Then there's the brother. Hasn't seen his sister for twenty years, yet suddenly goes to stay at her hotel and, next thing you know, she's found dead under what could certainly look like suspicious circumstances,' said the superintendent. 'What about getting the plain-clothes blokes to look at it? A few discreet enquiries is all it wants.'

'The doctor doesn't like that knock on the head, sir, in spite of the fact that he wouldn't state it was caused deliberately. I reckon he thought there had been foul play, all the same.'

'Think he's got anything to go on?'

'Nothing that looks like evidence, but he's seen a lot of knocks and bruises in his time and I'd trust his instinct, sir. He doesn't accept that yarn about her being blown off the cliff any more than I do.'

There was another person, apart from the police and the doctor, who was not satisfied with the verdict. Marius, back at his hotel, telephoned his wife that, after all, he thought he would return to the island, send the children home and take up his residence at the hotel again for a time.

'I do not know what more I can find out,' he said, concluding the conversation, 'but I am not willing to allow matters to remain as they are.' He rang off, oblivious of a cry from Clothilde of 'Oh, but, Marius—' for he knew that his wife would argue against his proposed course of action and turn the telephone call into an expensive battle of personalities which she would probably make acrimonious. He was not a particularly mean man, but he could see no point in paying for a one-sided and probably lengthy dispute from which nobody would gain except the Post Office.

Meanwhile his children had confided in Laura, who, picking out the word *vigilantes* from Sebastian's improbable tale, relayed the gist of his account to Dame Beatrice.

'They've told me that this Ransome Lovelaine has the farm cottage with the smallholding,' she concluded. 'Don't you think we should get speech with him?'

He'll surely be willing to talk, if these smugglers attempted to drown him.'

'But he does not think they did try to drown him. He appears to have regarded the incident merely as a warning, and he may accept it as such. That being so, the last thing he is likely to do—' said Dame Beatrice.

'Is to grass on the smugglers, you mean.'

'We have no direct information that the men who set about him *are* smugglers, you know.'

'Not even with the tip-off we had from Gavin? Come now, Mrs Croc!' said Laura, using her private name for her saurian employer.

'Very well, I concede the point, but the time to talk openly to Ransome Lovelaine is not yet. I will go and see him a little later on, so that there will appear to be no obvious connection between my visit and his experiences in the cave, but, even then, smuggling is the last thing I shall mention,' said Dame Beatrice.

'Won't you even tell Gavin that we may be on to something?'

'No, but you are at liberty to do so.'

'May I say you think as I do?'

'You may say that I have certain suspicions, if you like.'

'Do you think the witches were all mixed up in it? I mean, they were the ones who blindfolded him and tied his hands behind his back. I can't help thinking it was all a put-up job. If we could show that the witches are the smugglers — and I told you before that I think they are—'

'You may be correct, of course, in thinking that.'

'You mean you think so, too?'

'I retain an open mind. But where does Eliza Chayleigh come into all this? I shall be interested to hear what happened at the inquest.'

'We shan't know, unless it was a verdict of murder and, taking everything into account, I don't believe that's likely.'

The verdict was brought to the island by Marius. His children, who were not expecting him back, were not in the hotel when he arrived. However, even although their table-companions, with a few other of the bird-watchers, had left the island, Sebastian and Margaret were not very pleased to see him. All the same, as much out of kindness as out of policy, they decided to disguise their feelings. Miss Crimp, on the contrary, made no attempt to disguise hers.

'Oh, Mr Lovelaine!' she had exclaimed in dismay when he presented himself at the reception desk. 'I *quite* understood that you had left us! I have let your room.'

‘Then I fear, Miss Crimp, that I must ask you to find me another. I have come to escort my son and daughter home, and that, as you are well aware, cannot be done until the next boat calls.’

‘Well, you know how full the hotel is, Mr Lovelaine. The only thing I can suggest is that we put up a camp bed in the sitting-room of your son’s chalet. That really is the best I can do for you.’

‘Go home?’ said Sebastian, when, on meeting him after his interview with Miss Crimp, he informed them that she proposed to instal him (until the boat called) in their tiny sitting-room. ‘But why? And why have you come back, Father? Not that we aren’t glad to see you, of course, but we thought you had left the island for good and were quite agreeable to our finishing out the month here.’

‘Well, we will talk that over later. Do you not wish to know how it went with your aunt?’

At this incongruous way of putting it, Margaret gave an hysterical little squeal of laughter which her brother stifled by giving her a slight but meaningful kick on the ankle.

‘What did the coroner’s jury decide?’ he asked his father.

‘An open verdict was returned. We may expect the police to be interested. The medical evidence was that she had hit her head and was dead by the time the body had reached the water. It is quite established that death was not by drowning.’

‘So police action is contemplated? Oh, well, that’s a good thing, I suppose, although nobody wants to be mixed up with the rozzers.’

‘From the point of view of common justice it is, as you say, a good thing, my boy. I do not believe that your aunt, knowing the island and its dangers from high winds — the man Dimbleton told the court of cattle which had been blown over the cliffs, incidents within his own experience — I *cannot* believe that your aunt would have exposed herself to such an obvious danger.’

‘No, it doesn’t seem likely that Aunt Eliza would have taken that sort of risk,’ said Sebastian. ‘Besides, I don’t believe the winds at this time of year would be all that strong. I mean, Maggie and I have walked all round the island, on and off, since we’ve been here, and on the cliff paths, too, and although it’s true that the wind never seems to stop blowing, we never felt we were in any danger of being blown over.’

‘So,’ said Marius, ‘I suggest that you two leave the island and that I employ a private detective to look after my interests. I do not rule out my first impression,

which was that your aunt met with foul play. I do not care, either, for the thought that Ransome and his father live on the island and have an interest, very possibly, in Lizzie's death.'

'Well, you thought we ourselves might have an interest in it, Father,' said Margaret, with a bluntness and a boldness which surprised her hearers and herself.

'Here, steady on, Maggie!' protested her brother.

'Really, my dear!' remonstrated Marius.

'Well,' said the girl, facing these strictures with the grimness of one who now felt that, having started a hare, she had better pursue it to the kill, 'suppose you *do* employ a private detective, Father, and suppose he *does* find out that there was something suspicious about Aunt Eliza's death, isn't it going to occur to somebody that she was quite all right until *we* decided to visit the island? It seems...' Margaret faltered a little, but continued, albeit without quite daring to meet her father's eye '... it seems pretty logical to me. I mean, do we *really* want to start people talking?'

Sebastian suddenly decided to back her up.

'Nothing,' he said, 'can bring Aunt Eliza back, so I *can* see Maggie's point, Father. A private-eye might stir up all sorts of mud. I mean, Aunt Eliza's past isn't exactly that of Caesar's wife, is it? I've got to go back to college in the autumn, and Maggie's got another year at school. We don't want to have to live down Aunt Eliza's murder or something else unsavoury. There's your own professorship, too, to think about, wouldn't you say?'

'I should hardly lose that through the death of my only sister,' said Marius stiffly and, almost for the first time in their lives, speaking as man to man with his son. 'That is unless there were some reason for thinking that I had a hand in it. All the same, if there *was* something criminal, I feel I owe it to your aunt's memory to have it unmasked.'

'Yes, quite, and all very fine, but dirty linen isn't only grubby, Father. It also is inclined to stink.'

'Father,' said Margaret suddenly, 'you mentioned Ransome just now. There's something you ought to know about him. If Seb hadn't happened to be on the spot, the chances are that Ransome could have been murdered. What we ought to do—'

'Ransome murdered?'

'He himself says he thinks it was only horse-play,' said Sebastian, 'but I'm not sure he's telling his true thoughts. It was only a day or two ago...' He told

the story truthfully but economically.

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed his father. ‘Witches and warlocks, bird-watchers and thugs! What sort of place *is* this island? I am more anxious than ever that you should leave it.’

‘Father,’ said Margaret, ‘Seb and I still want to stay. We thought we might be able to get Dame Beatrice to look into things. You said she was a criminologist and a consultant psychiatrist to the Home Office, didn’t you? We promised Laura—her secretary, you know — that we’d let them know what happened at the inquest, and as you mentioned bringing in a private detective, what about your getting in touch with Dame Beatrice? *She* wouldn’t stir up mud, so, if it would make you any happier—’

‘My dear child, I can’t ask Dame Beatrice to act as a private detective! It would be an insult to suggest such a thing to a person of her eminence.’

‘Of course you couldn’t ask her outright. I realise that. But there wouldn’t be any harm in telling her about the inquest and seeing how she reacts, particularly as she was the first doctor to see the body. She might even *want* to give you her views when she’s heard what you have to say. Do speak to her, Father. She is bound to be discreet and, if she did decide to look into the thing, it would relieve your mind, you know it would, and you couldn’t have a cleverer person on your side if all that you think about her is true.’

‘I do not need anybody “on my side” as you call it, but perhaps it would not be a bad thing to canvass Dame Beatrice’s views. Very well. I will go along to *Puffins* as soon as we have dined.’

‘I still think you’d do better to leave things as they are,’ said Sebastian. ‘Pig or no pig, I mean.’

‘Pig? What are you talking about?’

‘You had better ask Dame Beatrice,’ said Margaret.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pursuit of a Vendetta?

‘What’s that to me? I waft not fish nor fowls,
Nor beasts (fond thing) but only human souls.’

Robert Herrick



Margaret, to her brother’s surprise, had brow-beaten Miss Crimp into giving Marius a room in the house.

‘I did think, Seb,’ she said, ‘that it would be the *last* thing to have him sharing the chalet, even for a night or two. He was most intrigued about the pig, wasn’t he? As for me, the more I think about things, the creepier they seem to get. Murders and witches and gangsters are all very well in books and on television, but I find I do rather bar them in real life. Anyway, I’m tired of the island. There’s nothing more to do here—’

‘Except find out who killed Aunt Eliza.’

‘I don’t want any part of that. It isn’t as though we knew her, and now there’s been a murderous attempt on Ransome as well, I think we’re better away from it all. What occurs to me is that we’re members of the same family, and people know it.’

‘Oh, nonsense, Maggie! Nobody on the island connects us with Ransome and Aunt Eliza!’

‘Miss Crimp does.’

‘Miss Crimp?’

‘She’s got this partnership in the hotel. She knows The Tutor is Aunt Eliza’s brother. That means she knows we’re related to Ransome. Well, she’s got rid of Aunt Eliza—or somebody has — and my bet is that she’s at the bottom of this business of trying to drown Ransome. She may even think it has succeeded. If it had done, that would have left our family as Aunt Eliza’s only relatives. Of course I know it all depends on Aunt’s will, but apart from any question of money or property, who else would have any reason to murder Aunt Eliza? The Crimp probably hated her. I’m sure she hates *us*.’

‘Well, there’s something in your argument, perhaps. Let’s wait until The

Tutor has spoken to Dame Beatrice. That will probably decide matters, apart from any action the police may take.'

'Shall we go with him to *Puffins*?'

'I don't suppose he'll want us tagging along.'

It transpired, during conversation over the dinner table, that Marius had decided to ask his son, but not his daughter, to accompany him, but at this Margaret protested with so much vehemence that her father felt obliged to reconsider his offer.

'Well,' he said, 'I do not feel that I ought to inflict three of us on Dame Beatrice, so, my dear, if you feel put out at being left here alone, I will go by myself to *Puffins* and Sebastian shall stay here with you. Will that be satisfactory?'

'Yes, thank you, Father.'

'And, in any case, on second thoughts, Sebastian,' said Marius, 'perhaps it will be easier for both parties if I interview Dame Beatrice alone.'

'Very well, Father,' said Sebastian; but when their father had left the hotel for the short, downhill walk to *Puffins*, he turned on his sister reproachfully. 'You little chump,' he said. 'Now bang goes our chance of getting in on the ground floor of this frightful but exciting business.'

'The Tutor will tell us all about it, and report what Dame Beatrice has to say.'

'Like hell he will! When did he ever take us completely into his confidence? He still thinks we're a couple of kids and he's as secretive as a clam, anyway. He'll tell us just as much as he thinks it's good for us to know, and that will be damn all, I can assure you. No, you young fathead, you've sold the pass. What on earth was there to be scared of, anyway, so long as you stayed in the hotel? You didn't need to spend the evening alone in the chalet.'

'I didn't say I was scared. I didn't see why I should be left out of the fun, that's all.'

'Oh, well, it's all done with and settled now, so that's that, I suppose.'

'Well, stop complaining, then. I don't often interfere with your plans. The fact is, Seb, that I don't like and I don't trust Miss Crimp, and the thought of being left alone here does scare me. She gives me goose flesh.'

'Yet you bearded her in her den and made her give The Tutor a room. Oh, well, girls will be girls, I suppose. Perhaps we can pump Laura Gavin when we go for our morning bathe.'

'Oh, Seb, I'm sorry I interfered.'

‘Say no more about it. What shall we do to pass the rest of the evening?’

‘Are we waiting up for The Tutor, then? There really doesn’t seem much point.’

‘Oh, well, you go to bed, then, but I expect he’ll like to find one of us awake when he gets back.’

‘I say, Seb, you do think Aunt Eliza was murdered for her money, don’t you?’

‘I don’t see what else there is to think. That’s if she *was* murdered, you know. It seems an open question.’

‘But if it was for what she had to leave, isn’t Ransome in rather a peculiar position?’

‘Well, I suppose he’d be one of the claimants, but, then, so are we, as you rather boldly pointed out to The Tutor.’

‘That’s true, so far as it goes. Why, though, did Ransome tell us Aunt Eliza was in debt? If that’s true, it lets him out.’

‘And us, too, no doubt—not that anybody could suspect The Tutor of murdering anybody. It isn’t his scene.’

‘To go back to Ransome...’

‘Well?’

‘Perhaps it’s only since Aunt’s death that he found out she had nothing to leave but debts.’

‘If we’re going in for wild speculations, the same could apply to Miss Crimp.’

‘But she denied that there were any debts, didn’t she?’

‘Could be camouflage. Anyway, it can be proved that, *if* Aunt Eliza was murdered, none of our family could have done it. She was dead before we set foot on the island.’

‘That’s a comfort, anyhow. Do you know, I think I *will* go to bed, if you’re sure you don’t mind.’

‘All right, unless you’d like a knock-up at table tennis first. Among the other (possibly unpaid-for) improvements listed on the brochure, I seem to remember a notice that one of the chalets is listed as a games room. Shall we toddle across and take a butcher’s?’

‘Oh, very well, then. We’d better change our shoes, though. I must, anyway. I can’t play table tennis in my evening shoes. Are you coming?’ (They were in the lounge of the hotel.)

‘No, I shan’t bother. If I can dance in these pumps, I can play table tennis in

them.'

'And your dinner jacket?'

'Oh, well, look, then, we'll stroll over to the chalets and out there I can shed my jacket and you can take it with you and bring me back my thin sweater while I repair to the games room and bag a table for our game.'

The large chalet which was called the games room was situated at the far end of the sunken garden so that any sounds which emanated from it should not penetrate to the other chalets and disturb the rest of their inhabitants.

Margaret and Sebastian, therefore, went their separate ways, he across the sunken garden and up the steps on the far side of it, she in almost the opposite direction. She had slung her brother's dinner-jacket round her shoulders and was hitching it into position when she became aware that someone was standing at one of the windows of the chalet which she and Sebastian occupied. The sun was beginning to set and was going down in a blaze of splendour to the sea, but the sky was clear and the day was not yet done. It was an hour, however, when Margaret and her brother had usually retired to their chalet, not to sleep, but to read the books which Sebastian, who had guessed correctly the contents of Laura's rectangular parcel when first she had come to the island, was in the habit of borrowing from time to time.

The golden glow of the declining sun seemed to be setting the windows of the chalet on fire, and Margaret, in any case, could not see the visitor's face. His back was towards her, and his figure, against the almost blinding light, was nothing more than a silhouette. As the girl walked towards him she saw something more. He was busy at the window with the obvious intention of attempting to force it open. As soon as she realised this, Margaret ran forward, shouting:

'Hi, there! What are you up to?'

At this the man turned and ran. He ran clumsily, for he was heavily built and did not appear to be in his first youth. Margaret made no attempt to pursue him, neither did she continue in her course towards the chalet. She stopped dead, her heart pounding. Then she turned and made off in the direction of the games room and flung herself at her astonished brother.

'Where's my sweater?' he demanded.

'A man!' gulped Margaret. 'A man trying to get into our chalet!'

Except for themselves the games room was empty. Sebastian took her by the shoulders and put her on to a bench which was against the wall.

'Here, steady on,' he said, 'What's all the panic about?'

‘A man! Trying to force a window. I’m sure he thought we were in there. Since Father went to the inquest we’ve always gone back there after dinner. We were sitting in the lounge a bit longer than usual tonight. Oh, Seb, I’m *scared*! First Aunt Eliza, then Ransome, now us. Oh, I’ll be so thankful when we go home! I hate this beastly place!’

‘Now, then, take it steady,’ said Sebastian. ‘I bet all you saw was somebody who’d mistaken our chalet for his own. Probably put away a couple too many in the bar. Come on, I’ll walk back over there with you. Why, it’s still daylight! Nobody tries to burgle a place—’

‘It wasn’t a burglar!’

‘Well, I never said it was. I’m sure it was only some pickled customer mistaking his home from home. It does happen, even in the best-regulated hotels, you know, and the chalets are all alike.’

‘But I tell you he was trying to force a window! I’m sure he was!’

‘What of it? Found his key wouldn’t fit and was too sozzled to realise he was trying to open the wrong box, so he had a go at a window, that’s all. For goodness’ sake forget it.’

‘But he ran away as soon as I shouted.’

‘Probably brought him to his senses. A sudden jolt does do that sometimes. Come on, now, not to worry. Shall we have a knock-up or shan’t we?’

‘I shouldn’t be able to hit a ball, and I’ve still got these silly shoes on.’

‘All right, give me back my jacket. We’ll go over to the hotel and I’ll buy you a stiffener in the bar. You’re just about old enough, aren’t you?’

They stayed in the hotel bar for three-quarters of an hour. Under the mingled influence of the cheerful chatter round about her, the comfort of her brother’s presence and the effect of two fairly potent drinks, Margaret relaxed and calmed down, and when Sebastian, with a glance at the clock, suggested that it was time to think about going to the chalet before it got quite dark, she was ready enough to accompany him.

When they reached their chalet, however, she hesitated.

‘You don’t think he managed to get in while we were in the bar, do you?’ she asked. Sebastian laughed.

‘We’ll soon find out,’ he said, producing his key. ‘We’ll go in by my door, shall we? You stay out here, if you like, while I have a butcher’s.’

‘No. If it’s anybody nasty, two of us will be better than one.’

There was nobody in the chalet and no signs anywhere that anyone had attempted to force an entrance. Sebastian drew the curtains in both bedrooms

and in the tiny sitting-room and Margaret switched on the light. They opened a small flask of brandy which Sebastian had talked the barman into letting him have, and he had just poured out a small tot for each of them when there came a sharp tapping on the window. Sebastian was so startled that he almost dropped the flask. Margaret was petrified.

‘It’s him!’ she said, her voice rising to a terrified squeak. ‘No! Don’t go near the window! Don’t!’

‘Oh, rot!’ said Sebastian, in an unconvincing tone; but he did not go to the window. He called out, ‘Push off, whoever you are! Get lost! Drop dead!’

There was silence. They waited, but nothing else happened, neither did they hear the sound of retreating footsteps for, although there were paved paths up to the doors of the chalets, there was grass under the windows.

‘I wish to God people wouldn’t think it funny to play the fool at night,’ said Sebastian. Scarcely had he spoken when there came a thunder of knocks on his bedroom outside door. It sounded as though somebody was hammering on it with a heavily-knobbed stick.

‘It’s the murderer!’ whispered Margaret. ‘Don’t open the door, whatever you do! First Aunt Eliza, then Ransome and now us! I said it before, and—’

‘Oh, rot!’ said Sebastian. He raised his voice and, in a shriller tone than he intended, he called out,

‘Is that you, Father?’ The banging had ceased and, more to reassure his sister than himself, he called out again, ‘Is it you, Father?’ There was no reply. ‘Who’s there?’ he demanded; but again there was no answer except a deep-throated, bloodcurdling laugh. Sebastian snorted in annoyance. He felt sure of his ground now. ‘It’s one of the bird-boys acting the fool. I’m sure of it. I’m going to catch him out,’ he said.

‘No,’ whispered Margaret, ‘don’t go! Please don’t go! Don’t open any doors. It’s almost dark outside and—well, there was that man—’

‘All right, then,’ Sebastian whispered in return. ‘But I still think it’s somebody acting the goat. You go to bed and I’ll come in and sit with you if you want me to, but don’t get all in a tizzy. There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s only some lunatic trying to be funny, you know, or else another tight chap—or even the first one back again.’

‘I can’t go to bed while somebody is trying to get into the chalet.’ Margaret was frightened and betrayed the fact.

‘Good gracious, nobody is *really* trying to get in,’ said Sebastian. ‘It’s only a drunk, I tell you, or some boorish foolery. They’re probably doing it at all the

chalet doors. Buck up, old thing! Don't let your nerves get you down.' He spoke unusually roughly, since his own nerves had received an unwelcome jolt.

'Oh, I'll be so glad to be leaving!' said his sister.

'Yes, well, all right, but not to worry. Look, we haven't touched our brandy. Let's have a sip or two, shall we? We only had a couple of drinks at the hotel just now.'

Marius reached *Puffins* at just after ten o'clock. He had been for a walk first to collect his thoughts, but it was still light enough to allow him to find his way down the surprisingly steep path which led from the sea-road to Dame Beatrice's front door.

'I must apologise for calling on you without warning,' he said, when he was shown in to a sparsely-furnished sitting-room, 'but I shall be leaving Great Skua again by the first outgoing boat and I have problems which I cannot solve.'

'Psychological problems?' asked Laura, the only occupant of the room. 'We're busy, you know, on Dame Beatrice's memoirs. Besides, a course of treatment is apt to be a long job and, if you are leaving the island so soon, you'd be better advised to consult somebody in London.'

'I don't know whether one would call mine a psychological problem, and, in any case, even if I were in need of a psychiatrist—and (like most people) I may be, for all I know—I have not come to consult Dame Beatrice on my own behalf in the sense which I think you mean.'

'I suppose you've come about the death of Mrs Chayleigh,' said Laura.

'Yes, that's it,' said Marius gratefully. 'The open verdict at Friday's inquest was most unsatisfactory. I am convinced that my sister was murdered.'

'All right, I'll get Dame Beatrice. She was the first doctor to see the body. Sit down, won't you?'

Dame Beatrice, summoned from the room she used as a study, treated the visitor to an alligator smile and said that she was delighted to see him.

'Of course we are interested in your charming children,' she added. 'I wonder whether it is owing to their representations that you have come to see me?'

'As a family we throw ourselves upon your mercy, I fear, Dame Beatrice. You will know, of course, that I crossed to the mainland to attend the inquest and my unfortunate sister's obsequies, but I wonder whether you have heard what the coroner's jury had to say? They brought in an open verdict, and I have no doubt that the police will be questioning us very soon. Dame Beatrice, I am certain that my poor sister was murdered. I believe you have been concerned with

investigations into sudden deaths—homicide and kindred matters. I realise that you are extremely busy and that, so far, I can produce no concrete evidence that my sister's death was the product of malice aforethought, but...

'Ah,' said Dame Beatrice, 'so you have heard about the pig.'

'The pig? What pig? The children mentioned a pig?'

Dame Beatrice told him. Then she added,

'I will look into the matter, of course. In fact, I had intended to do so on my own account and as a matter of interest, but it is a pleasure to be assured that I shall not be meddling in something which is hardly my concern, except...' she looked significantly at him '... except that a rumour seems to be floating around among the hotel servants that your sister was last seen making her way towards this house. I was not in residence at the time, of course, nevertheless, as the present occupier, I shall be glad to do what I can to establish the reason for Mrs Chayleigh's disappearance and the manner of her death, if only for my own satisfaction. Had she, to your knowledge, any enemies?'

'None, so far as I know, but I have been out of touch with her for many years.'

'Does anybody obtain any monetary advantage by her death?'

'Well, that's the difficulty. I saw her lawyer after the funeral and it seems that she left all of which she died possessed to be divided equally among her natural son Ransome Lovelaine — my sister, as you may have been informed, changed her name to Chayleigh when she inherited the Chayleigh house and estate on this island and adopted the status of a married woman for what, no doubt, she thought good and sufficient reasons — myself and Miss Crimp.'

'I see.'

'Suppose that I should die first—I do not know how many years Miss Crimp has to her credit, and age is nothing really to go by — but supposing that I have the shortest life-span — then my share is to be divided between the other two. In other words, except for the last of the three of us, we have no more than a life-interest in our share of the property. The survivor, however, takes all and can dispose of it at will. That is the thing in a nutshell.'

'And supposing you are right, and that your sister was murdered,' said Dame Beatrice, giving him another sharp glance, 'would a third share in her property have tempted one of you to kill her, I wonder?'

'I can only speak for myself,' said Marius, 'and I can assure you that I did not kill my sister for that or for any other reason.'

'Besides, you were not on the island at the time of her death and no doubt

you can prove that. What about Ransome? Would he think that, as her nearest relative, he should have been left everything instead of only one-third?’

‘That would mean he murdered for revenge as well as for gain, would it not?’

‘Very likely. What about Miss Crimp? She also might feel that she had a major claim as she helps to run the hotel and, I imagine, has shares in it.’

‘Yes, I believe she has. My son and daughter tell me, however, that the hotel is doing very badly and that my sister (and, I suppose, Miss Crimp) are in debt. Sebastian says that they have no proof of this, but they learned it, I believe, from Ransome.’

‘If there are debts, these, presumably, would need to be discharged before any benefits could accrue to the three claimants.’

‘I shall make it my business to find out exactly how matters stand, but, judging by the fact that my sister had made no record of my booking at the hotel, I fear she may have been very slap-dash and careless and her affairs may need a good deal of disentangling. Of course, I suppose she was a very busy woman, but even the busiest person should be businesslike.’

‘Very busy?’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Would you think so? From various bits of gossip which Laura has picked up since we have been here, it seems that the hotel is rarely more than a quarter full, even in the height of the summer, and that the ornithologists’ numbers are a phenomenon.’

‘Yes, but I don’t think they’re paying full rates,’ said Marius. ‘Well, I must not take up more of your time, Dame Beatrice. I am most obliged to you for being willing to look into my family affairs, and I will be guided by you in every particular.’

He rose to leave. Laura appeared and escorted him to the door.

‘It’s very dark tonight. Can I lend you a torch?’ she asked.

‘Oh, it is only a step and, once I am up out of this dip, the hotel lights will guide me,’ Marius replied. ‘Goodnight, Mrs Gavin. I am greatly obliged to you for your help.’

‘I’ve done nothing yet,’ said Laura, who had been present at the interview. She kept the door open to light him through the small front garden and then called goodnight as he disappeared among the shrubs. She returned to Dame Beatrice and said,

‘What’s his real problem, I wonder. He’s scared about something. Are you going to do anything about it?’

‘Well,’ Dame Beatrice replied, ‘it might fit in very well with our other task,

the one laid upon us by our dear Robert.'

'Which, so far, we have not begun.'

'You are always so impatient. We have to begin by establishing in the minds of the inhabitants that we are friendly, innocent and completely occupied with our own concerns. Only then can we operate with any assurance of succeeding in our enterprise. Nobody will be in the least surprised by our open interest in Mrs Chayleigh's death. It is the talk of the island. Everyone, whether he knows anything about us or not, will fully expect that we shall be sufficiently interested to make enquiries and listen to gossip.'

'You seem pretty cold-blooded about the wretched woman's death.'

'I did not know her, and that absolves me from prejudice. It is as well to approach the death of strangers with an open mind, although one is precluded from doing so in the case of relatives, friends and acquaintances.'

'Granted that Mrs Chayleigh was murdered, do you think it was for what she had to leave?'

'It is possible, of course.'

'Even if she left debts?'

'The murderer (if there is one) may not know about the debts and, moreover, it is not yet established that she left any. The story appears to rest on the so-far unsupported word of the illegitimate son, who may have the best of reasons for minimising the supposed value of his inheritance.'

'So where do we go from here?'

'I have not made up my mind about that. It may be useful for me to have a talk with Mr Ransome Lovelaine.'

'Be sticking your neck out if he happens to be the murderer, won't you?'

'My neck is not very long, dear child.'

'Wonder what Père Lovelaine thinks you can do?'

Marius, taking the steep upward path towards the road which led back to the hotel, was pondering on this problem with such absorption that, until a flying figure dived at him out of the darkness and astonished and infuriated him by bringing him to the ground, he had no idea that his departure from *Puffins* had been witnessed by anybody except Laura, and therefore he was totally unprepared for this unmannerly encounter.

It was fortunate for him that the path, although rather rough, was on a sharp slope, for, instead of his opponent being able to get his hands on his victim's throat, as appeared to be his intention, the pair of them rolled over and over towards the front door of the house. Marius was small and spare and made no

claim to athletic prowess, but he had never been self-indulgent and was in good condition. Moreover, he did not lose his head. Realising at once that he was no match for a much heavier adversary and one who had taken him by surprise, he adopted his only real means of defence, and shouted loudly for help so long as he could keep the other man from throttling him. He had good lungs and a rather high tenor voice which carried well. The front door of *Puffins* was flung open and a flood of light fell upon the struggling pair.

‘What the hell?’ enquired the voice of Dame Beatrice’s sturdy manservant George. He was immediately joined by Laura, who said, ‘What is it, George?’ At this the aggressor scrambled up with some celerity, kicked out at the prostrate Marius and made off at a scrambling gallop which almost at once took him out of the orbit of the light which shone from the house. Marius picked himself up, limping from the kick which, intended for his groin, had taken him harmlessly but painfully on the top of the left thigh, and apologised for creating a disturbance.

‘He must have mistaken me for somebody else. Perhaps he thought I was an escaping burglar,’ he said when, having been taken into the house and given brandy, he had recounted his experience.

‘Well, be that as it may,’ said Laura firmly, ‘I’m going the rounds of the house before you leave, to make sure the doors and windows are shut, then I shall arm Henri, our cook, with our heaviest poker and his special kitchen knife, and George and I will escort you back to the hotel.’

‘What is Henri’s function to be, then?’ Dame Beatrice meekly enquired.

‘Guard duty, until George and I get back.’

‘You really mustn’t trouble to come with me,’ said Marius, proving that, in spite of his children’s opinion of him, he possessed heroic qualities.

‘Nonsense!’ said Laura. ‘I only hope the dotty blighter tries again, that’s all.’

Marius did not bolster up this hope, but made no further protest about being escorted back to the hotel.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ariadne's String-box

'Or else tuck up your gray frock,
And saddle your goat on your green cock,
And may his bridle a bottom of thread
To roll up how many miles you have rid.'

Ben Jonson



But who could it have been, Father?' asked Sebastian after breakfast on the following morning.

'I really believe, now that I have had time to consider the matter, that it was Eliza's murderer, my boy.'

'But why attack *you*?'

'There was the attack on and the attempted drowning of Ransome, if you have described the incident correctly.'

'You mean it's a family thing? Well, I'm rather glad you think so, because I'll tell you something else. Somebody made two spirited attempts to get into our chalet last night. Maggie scared him off the first time, but—'

'Good heavens! I trust your doors were locked?'

'They're self-locking and the windows were shut. Maggie and I like a fug. No, the chap, whoever he was, was trying to force a window when Maggie spotted him. Later he nearly battered a door down with his knocking. Then he gave a dirty laugh when we challenged him and breezed off. We didn't get much sleep, I can tell you. Don't suppose you did, either.'

'What did Dame Beatrice have to say?' asked Margaret.

'She did not commit herself, my dear.'

'Not even after you were set upon?'

'She thought that was an interesting development.'

'Means *she* thinks there's somebody gunning for us,' said Sebastian, 'and really there can't be much doubt about it now. I suppose you've no idea who your attacker could have been, Father?'

'None at all. It seems that somebody must have followed me to *Puffins* last

evening and waited for me to emerge.'

'That sounds like somebody staying at the hotel who saw you leave and followed you. I suppose you didn't happen to mark his face in any way when he collared you?' suggested Sebastian.

'I'm afraid not, my boy. My only object was to keep his hands from my throat. All I know is that he was a heavier man than I, and may have been an older one, but of that I cannot be sure.'

'Did you get any clue as to the way he was dressed? I mean, for instance, did you get any impression of an oiled-wool jersey, such as the fishermen wear, or a bird-watcher's anorak or anything identifiable, Father?' asked Margaret. Marius shook his head.

'I could not say what he was wearing, except that his boots were heavy. The kick on the thigh which I sustained is extremely painful.'

'Good thing it wasn't in your ribs,' said Sebastian. 'That's the usual target. Well, what's our course of action?'

'I really think we had better carry out my plan of leaving Great Skua. I dislike to turn my back on danger, but really there seems little point in our remaining here under these circumstances, when we cannot even identify our enemy. I shall be glad, I must say, to receive your assurance that you will both exercise every care, right up to the moment of our embarkation. I do hope, Sebastian, that you will make no difficulties about returning home with your sister and me.'

'Oh, I think the three of us should stick together,' said Sebastian. 'Aunt Eliza and Ransome and now you, Father, is coming it a bit too thick. By all means let's catch the next boat. It will be a score for Boobie when we all come crawling back, but there are worse things than her shouts of triumph.'

'Your mother is expecting us shortly, I telephoned her from the mainland. There will be no teasing on her side. She will be most relieved when we return safe and sound.'

This proved to be the case. Clothilde welcomed them, as she had promised, and had ordered a most appetising meal which she had planned long since. She listened with suitable horror to the account of the abduction of Ransome and the attack on Marius, and suggested that the latter should ask for police protection until Eliza's murderer was apprehended.

'I hardly think that will be necessary, my dear,' said Marius. 'The danger spot is the island itself, I feel sure. Besides, all the incidents will bear other interpretations if one considers them logically and calmly. Eliza's death may

well have been accidental; Ransome may have been the victim of crude horseplay; I myself may have been mistakenly identified by my attacker. There is really nothing to go on.'

'All the same, you thought it best to leave the island as soon as ever you could.'

'Oh, we were pretty tired of it,' said Sebastian, 'and our reason for going there did not, after all, obtain. It was to curry favour with Aunt Eliza that we set forth, and, as circumstances had it, we did not even meet her. What about Greece, Father? Is there any chance that we might finish the holiday there?'

'No, there is not,' said Clothilde, before her husband could answer the question. 'Marius, I did not intend to tell you this, but I, too, have been on the island.'

'You?'

'Yes. As you will remember, I left to take a holiday of my own choice, leaving you all to see yourselves off to Great Skua.'

'You said you were going to stay with Cousin Marie and Miss Potter. I hoped you were looking forward to it.'

'You should know me better than to have believed that I *wanted* to go there. I *did* go, in order to save money, and a thin time I had of it in Marie's smelly, poky, disease-ridden little hovel!'

'Oh, come, my dear! I have never been to it, but Cousin Marie always refers to it as a picturesque country cottage. But if you intended to go to Great Skua, why on earth did you not wait and go with us? It would have been delightful to have made a complete family holiday of it.'

'I never had the smallest intention of going there with you. I went on my own account to throw myself on Eliza's mercy.'

'On Lizzie's mercy? Whatever can you mean?'

'Boobie has boobed again,' said Sebastian in an undertone to his sister which was also intended for his mother's ears.

'Yes,' said Clothilde, defiantly, 'I *have* boobed, if you call it that! Marius, you should never have involved me in a joint bank account.'

'You mean you have overdrawn it again, my dear?'

'That is exactly what I mean. I have converted to my own use money which was intended for both of us. Oh, and the children, of course.'

'Does it mean Maggie can't go back to school or I to college?' asked Sebastian. 'Not to worry, darling. We can go into industry or down the mines and earn fabulous sums and have trade union cards and go on strike and help run the

country by *force majeure*.'

Clothilde burst into tears. Sebastian put his arm round her. Marius distressfully pulled his lip and Margaret said anxiously,

'Oh, Father, can't you do something? Haven't you got some shares to sell or can't you get a bank loan? Or perhaps we could sell this house and get something smaller. You mustn't let poor Boobs upset herself over something as silly as money.'

'There is no problem. Your mother has never understood money, my dear. The joint account was never more than a goodwill gesture on my part. Of course I have resources elsewhere, and of course there is no need for my dear wife to upset herself.'

'There you are, Boobie,' said her son, squeezing her up against him. 'We're not on the breadline yet.' He looked perplexedly at his father. 'You're not holding her acknowledged dottiness against her, are you?' he asked.

'Dear me, no,' said Marius. 'It is not the first time she has overdrawn that account. It is not that which is worrying me.'

Sebastian searched his father's face and enlightenment came.

'Good Lord!' he said, as his mother broke away from his encircling arm and rushed upstairs. 'Boobie has quite monumentally boobed this time. You mean she might have been on the island when Aunt Eliza died...'

'And at whose death I come in for all the money my parents left in trust for Eliza,' said Marius.

'That was a queer sort of affair,' said Laura to her employer. 'Why should anybody want to strangle a harmless little Ph.D. like Mr Lovelaine? And what are we going to do about it, if anything? I don't care to think of our guests being set upon on our very doorstep.'

'We are going to talk to Miss Crimp.'

'That little creep? What can she tell us?'

'That we shall have to find out, but first let us review the situation, as you would say, and plot the lie of the land.'

'Assemble the known facts and see what we can deduce from them?'

'Exactly.'

'Right. You shout, and I will make interpolations if necessary.'

'Very well.'

'Not losing track of the great thought that the death of Mrs Chayleigh may tie up in some way with our own little job here.'

'Quite. Well, now, to begin with we have Mr Lovelaine arriving, with his

children, to pay a visit to a sister whom he had not seen for very many years.'

'Yes. Why, I wonder, did he come?'

'It seems that she invited him. However, when he introduced himself at the hotel, he found that no booking had been made in his name, that his sister was absent and that Miss Crimp, in charge of reception, knew nothing whatever about him.'

'All the same, she took him in, and also the two youngsters.'

'That, to my mind, was somewhat surprising, considering that she was expecting an overflow of guests a week later.'

'These bird-fanciers? Yes, and a mixed bag they are! I've met some of them, and if they're genuine ornithologists I'm the king of Siam.'

'Interesting,' said Dame Beatrice. 'But, for the moment, we are concerning ourselves with the Lovelaine family, I thought.'

'Sorry! Over to you, then, although I'm bound to insist that, if they're watching birds, it's time some reputable citizens were watching *them*. Some of them — the majority, I expect — may be genuine enough, but they're being used as cover, I suspect, for a minority of evil persons who may be just the people we've been sent here to look out for.'

'I do not doubt it. Well, all in good time we will inform upon them in the proper quarters.'

'When we've got proof, you mean. Ah, well, back to the Lovelaines then, and let's get their affairs cleared out of the way. You were remarking that it was strange that Miss Crimp—'

'Took them in, although, according to the hotel system of bookings, there is no record of any correspondence between Marius Lovelaine and Mrs Chayleigh and I find that strange. I would think nothing of it in the ordinary course of events, for I understand that the hotel is rarely full...'

'But with these bird-watchers looming, and needing all the available accommodation—yes, quite so, indeed. You know what it looks like to me?'

'I can *imagine* what it looks like to you. You think that Miss Crimp knew perfectly well that the Lovelaines were expected and that she deliberately mislaid the correspondence.'

'Why should she do such a thing?'

'I do not think she did. I think it far more likely that if there *was* such a correspondence — and we have only Marius Lovelaine's word for that — it was Eliza Chayleigh who suppressed it.'

'What makes you think that?'

‘The absence of any entries in the hotel books. It is easy enough to throw away letters, but to remove an entry from a ledger or a day-book is a vastly different matter. The chances are that anybody doing such a thing would not only dispose of the one entry which it was requisite and necessary to conceal, but other entries which had been entered on the same page. I suggest, therefore, that the Lovelaines’ booking was not entered, and that Miss Crimp knew nothing about it for the simple reason that Eliza Chayleigh had never shown her any of the letters to and from Marius Lovelaine.’

‘But why hadn’t she? What could be the reason? She couldn’t have foreseen that she’d be dead before the Lovelaines turned up at the hotel, and that they’d have to explain themselves to the reception clerk.’

‘Quite. Therefore I say that our next intrusion into the affair must take the form of a conversation with Miss Crimp.’

‘She’ll probably lie.’

‘That remains to be seen. If she does, and we become aware of the fact, it will mean that she has something to conceal.’

‘Such as destroying letters and removing entries from ledgers,’ said Laura, grinning challengingly at her employer. Dame Beatrice leered fiendishly at her and led the way to the front door.

They had taken one or two meals at the hotel to give Henri, the cook whom Dame Beatrice had brought with her, a break from his duties, so, when they entered the vestibule, Miss Crimp regarded them, as they approached the desk, with a smile which, she hoped, combined both welcome and regret. Laura interpreted the smile.

‘It’s all right. I know how full you are. We don’t need a table for lunch,’ she said reassuringly. ‘We only need a drink.’

‘I’ll send Richard to you in the lounge,’ said Miss Crimp. ‘Will Dame Beatrice take sherry, as usual?’

‘Of course, but we want to talk to you,’ said Laura. ‘Dark doings are afoot and you are part of them.’

Miss Crimp regarded her with horror.

‘You want to *talk* to me?’ she said.

‘About the late Eliza Chayleigh. Dame Beatrice, as I expect you know, was the first doctor to see the body.’

‘She was not called at the inquest.’

‘Her evidence was not needed. The cause of death was perfectly plain. Deceased died of injuries. How she came by those injuries is another matter.

What chiefly interests Dame Beatrice, who is, as you may or may not know, a criminologist of repute, is that the last time Mrs Chayleigh was seen alive was when she was on her way to the house Dame Beatrice has rented. There is reason to wonder, therefore, whether Mrs Chayleigh met her death at *Puffins* and whether her body was put into the sea later.'

'All this has nothing to do with me.'

'You mean you decline to discuss it with Dame Beatrice?'

'Oh, I don't mind *discussing* it,' said Miss Crimp hastily, recognising a threat in Laura's tones. 'All I mean is that there is nothing I can say which is not already common knowledge.'

'Did you know that Mr Lovelaine was attacked the other evening as he was leaving after paying a visit to Dame Beatrice?'

'Attacked? Good gracious me! He said nothing about it to me, although, now you mention it, he did appear to be limping a little when he left the hotel to catch the boat.'

'Yes, his assailant kicked him when he was on the ground.'

'Who was it?'

'He doesn't know. Well, what about the sherry?'

'I will bring it myself. My assistant can take over the desk. My sitting-room is the one marked PRIVATE. It is on the first floor.'

'Right. Thanks. Whisky for me, as usual.'

Miss Crimp's sitting-room was incongruously furnished with modern chairs and Victorian ornaments. It also contained a studio couch which, at night, became a bed. Antimacassars decorated the chair-backs and a glass case which housed two stuffed seagulls and a sandpiper argued for pride of place with an enormous china swan which acted as a fern-pot and supported, if not the largest aspidistra in the world, that atrocious plant's second cousin. There was even a fringed and tasselled covering to the mantelpiece and a profusion of framed photographs on every available ledge.

'Doesn't look like a murderer's room,' said Laura, when they had let themselves in with the key supplied by Miss Crimp.

'George Joseph Smith played hymn-tunes on an American organ when he had drowned each of his wives in the bath,' observed Dame Beatrice. 'What did you find to say at the desk that we are accorded the pleasure of this secret interview?'

Laura had just finished telling her when Miss Crimp herself appeared, followed by the barman with his tray.

‘Just put it down, Thomas,’ she said. ‘We will help ourselves. Thomas is going,’ she added, when the barman had closed the door behind himself. ‘He is an expensive luxury in a place like this. The amount of alcohol our guests consume does not even pay his wages, let alone show us a profit. Eliza employed him because she held that, if there is a bar, there must be a barman, but, as I often pointed out, we had only to make an opening between the back of the office and the bar, and either she or I or the assistant receptionist could serve the very few guests who ordered drinks. There was no need whatever to have somebody perpetually on duty in the bar.’ Miss Crimp appeared to be talking to gain time.

‘In these days it behoves everyone to make what economies he can,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I suppose the hotel trade is not what it used to be in the days when a family seaside holiday was the accepted thing and none but the very rich thought of going abroad.’

‘You would never have got family holidays in a place like this at *any* time,’ said Miss Crimp. ‘There is nothing here for children—no sands to play on, no beach stalls, no entertainment of any kind. The hotel does not pay its way and never has, and there are still some large accounts outstanding which must be settled when Eliza’s will is proved.’

‘Too bad,’ said Laura, ‘to leave you saddled with debts.’

‘It’s all these extras, Mrs Gavin. The hard tennis court, the games room, the chalets themselves, and the place never more than half-full.’

‘What about this influx of ornithologists?’

‘At cut rates, of course, but, yes, such a gathering does help. Now that Eliza is no longer with us, I propose to advertise the hotel for conferences. If I could entice the delegates of political parties, or organisations such as the T.U.C. or even the school-teachers’ unions to hold their annual gatherings here, the place would soon look up and one of Eliza’s major extravagances might appear at last to be worthwhile. I refer to our magnificent lounge. It would make an excellent conference-hall.’

‘The hotel now belongs entirely to you, then?’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘You may do with it what you please?’

‘That remains to be seen. I was Eliza’s partner, as you know, and you may be sure that I shall do my best to maintain my rights. I may have to buy out Ransome Lovelaine, who inherits some of Eliza’s property, I believe, and Eliza once told me that her brother was also to benefit to some extent. However, Ransome is an easy-going man and I am hoping that he will be content to leave

me to manage the hotel in my own way and relieve him of all responsibility for it. In return I shall offer him a small share of the profits and I have every hope that he will be well-satisfied with that arrangement. As to the brother—but I am running on. What did you want to talk to me about?’

‘I wondered whether you could think of any reason why a murderous attack should be made on Ransome Lovelaine, a desperate attack made on Marius Lovelaine and an attempt made to enter the chalet which you allocated to his children,’ replied Dame Beatrice.

‘Think of any reason?’ said Miss Crimp. ‘I can *think* of one, certainly, but whether it is the right one I have no means of telling. The Lovelaines (of whom, of course, Ransome is one, although illegitimately born, a matter of which Eliza made no secret) must hold some clue to the cause of her death, and the rest must follow. They form a threat to the murderer, I suppose.’

‘So *you* think she was murdered, do you?’

‘What else is there to think? Eliza was not one to put an end to her own life, and a theory that she was blown off the cliff-top by accident is ridiculous. Eliza, who has lived on the island for years, would never place herself in a position of such known danger.’

‘I agree with you. But if Ransome or Marius had been in possession of the kind of evidence you indicate, would they not have approached the authorities with it?’

‘One must suppose so. The murderer must be mistaken, or else the intended victims are not conscious of what they know.’

‘I wonder whether I might digress a little? I understand that the hotel and the farm were left to Mrs Chayleigh by the elderly Miss Chayleigh, now deceased.’

‘That is so, but how do you come by the information?’

‘My secretary gave it to me. Laura is of a gregarious nature and has roved the island, picking up gossip of all kinds while ostensibly engaged in helping my researches into the history of the island.’

‘Oh, you are writing a history of the island? How very interesting. I understood that you were writing your memoirs.’

‘Oh, one likes variety,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘The spice of life, as someone has called it.’

‘A description with which I cannot agree,’ said Miss Crimp. ‘I prefer to pursue an even course.’

‘Pursue my course with even joy

And closely walk with thee to heaven,’ quoted Dame Beatrice solemnly.

‘If you care to put it like that,’ said Miss Crimp, staring at her. ‘Not I, but Charles Wesley. Tell me, if your knowledge extends so far, what impelled Miss Chayleigh to leave her money and property to the then Eliza Lovelaine? Was Eliza in her employment at the time when she made her will?’

‘I believe not. The truth is that Miss Chayleigh was aunt to the farmer Allen Cranby. When she found out that he had been unfaithful to his wife and had given Eliza a child, she disinherited him and made Eliza her heir.’

‘Were there no other relatives besides Mr Cranby?’

‘Well, I believe there is a second cousin, a woman.’

‘And she received nothing from her relative?’

‘I believe Eliza did something for her, and it was Eliza, of course, who gave Allen Cranby the farm. Conscience money she called it.’

‘She seems to have been a generous woman.’

‘Not generous enough to have renounced her rights and returned her gains to those who were of Chayleigh blood,’ said Miss Crimp acrimoniously.

‘That would have been expecting rather much of her, would it not?’

‘That depends upon the way you look at it.’

‘Do you mind a direct question, Miss Crimp?’ A spasm of alarm appeared for an instant on the receptionist’s pinched little face, but she said that she did not mind. ‘Do you suspect Allen Cranby of having murdered Eliza Chayleigh?’

‘That is indeed a direct question, Dame Beatrice. I have no idea, but I should think it most unlikely. In any case, it is not a fair question.’

‘True enough. I beg your pardon and I withdraw my query.’

‘In any case, what is your interest in the matter?’

‘The interest of all good citizens when they suspect that a crime has been committed. Who desecrated the Chayleigh headstones in the churchyard?’

‘I have no idea. I do not go to church.’

‘Who wrote the legend which adorns the long front of the public house-cum-village shop?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because Laura thinks that the same hand desecrated the Chayleigh graves.’

‘I should not have thought there was sufficient evidence for thinking that.’

‘Laura is highly imaginative, of course,’ said Dame Beatrice indifferently. ‘Would the local witches do such a thing?’

‘I really have no idea. At any rate they did not write the public house sign. That was done a year ago by one of the hotel visitors who thought she had a turn for such matters.’

‘There is just one more small point,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I understand that, on the day she disappeared, Mrs Chayleigh carried some provisions over to the house I have leased. Is that so?’

‘Yes, indeed, although why she could not have sent one of the servants I cannot think. She must have had some reason.’

‘Did you see her go?’

‘Yes, I did. I asked her why and she made some excuse about wanting to make sure that everything was in readiness for your tenancy.’

‘You did not suggest that she should go, of course?’ Miss Crimp shook her head. ‘So she had an interest in the letting, had she?’ Dame Beatrice continued.

‘Not to my knowledge. I cannot think why she went, except that it must have been to meet the person who turned out to be her murderer.’

‘Had anybody else on the island a key to the house?’

‘I believe Farmer Cranby was given one by the agents so that he could show intending tenants or purchasers over it.’

‘You said you did not suspect him of...’

‘Neither do I. I cannot explain my conviction, but he simply is not that sort of man.’

‘Have you seen a copy of Mrs Chayleigh’s will?’

‘No. She told me of its provisions, though.’

‘I suppose there is no chance that she might have changed its provisions without your knowledge?’

Miss Crimp changed colour.

‘Oh, but surely...!’ she said. ‘After all, I was her partner.’

‘Yes, quite. By the way, do you know who, on the island, killed a pig shortly before Mrs Chayleigh’s death?’

‘Killed a pig? I have no idea. What has that to do with either you or me?’

‘Time will show, I hope. Well, it is very kind of you to have granted me this interview, Miss Crimp. May I venture to ask a last and a personal question?’

‘You may *ask*,’ replied Miss Crimp with a slight and crooked smile.

‘Thank you. It is merely this: how did you come to be Mrs Chayleigh’s partner in the hotel business?’

‘Oh,’ said Miss Crimp, looking relieved, ‘Eliza advertised and, as I had the necessary capital, she took me on. I have been here just under a year, and have not, on the whole, regretted it.’

‘So what do you make of it?’ asked Laura.

‘I shall know better how to answer that question when I have talked to

Farmer Cranby and his son Ransome Lovelaine.'

'Is there any tie-up with our *raison d'être ici*?'

'None that I can see, but Time, as usual, will show.'

'I wonder whether you'd mind if I did a follow-up with J. Dimbleton, boatman? I feel I've rather left him and his pirate-pal in mid-air.'

'Oh, Miss Crimp and her fish? It's possible that that is all it was, you know — fish for the hotel meals.'

'Why should she go in person to see the men, though?'

'There may have been complaints.'

'Well, actually, I believe there were. In casual chat on the bathing-beach I gathered as much from the Lovelaine youth. All the same, I'd like to find out a bit more from Dimbleton. We became reasonably friendly on that boat-trip I made round the island.'

'Do not commit yourself as to the real reason for our presence here.'

'A warning I don't need. After lunch, then? We can stroll together as far as the farm and I can leave you there to do your stuff while I beard Dimbleton in his cottage.'

This programme was carried out. Laura escorted Dame Beatrice up to the farmhouse door, waited while her employer was admitted, and then sought Lighthouse Cottage and her own quarry. Dimbleton, however, was not at home, but, unless he had gone out in his boat, she thought she knew who could help her to find him. She and Dame Beatrice had lunched early, and it was barely a quarter past one when they had arrived at the farm. Laura therefore, made her way to the public house, where the landlord told her that Dimbleton had been in, but was now on his way to the landing-beach, 'where,' said the landlord, with a secretive smile, 'maybe he won't want company.'

'Not even if I want to hire his boat?' asked Laura.

'Doubt it,' said the innkeeper. 'Other fish to fry.'

'How long has he been gone?'

'Matter of twenty minutes, maybe.'

'Thanks.' Laura left the pub, turned in her previous tracks and walked along the rough road towards the hotel. She took the steep cliff-path and descended to the beach. She was in luck. Dimbleton was on board his cruiser. She hailed him. He climbed into his tiny dinghy, which he was about to winch up to the davits at the stern of his powered craft, and rowed himself ashore.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Nothing doing today, Mrs Gavin. I got business.'

'It's about fish,' said Laura. Dimbleton's expression altered.

‘That might be different,’ he said. ‘What about fish?’

‘There are complaints at the hotel.’

‘Honest? I’ve heard nothing of it. Where did you get it from?’

‘Where do you suppose?’

‘The game’s up, then. I thought so when McKell and his lads came over here on that bird-watching lark. Well, thanks for the information, Mrs Gavin. And now, just for the record, come clean. What’s your part in all this?’

‘That’s a difficult question,’ said Laura coolly. ‘Anyway, if you’ve anything to dump, I should get rid of it pronto. No point in hanging on to stinking fish.’

‘Where do you come in on the share-out?’

‘Ain’t going to be no share-out. Same like the boy with the apple-core, if you happen to know that story,’ said Laura. The boatman looked at her and scratched his head.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Into the Maze

‘Fountain-heads and pathless groves,
Places which pale passion loves!
Moonlight walks, when all the fowls
Are warmly housed, save bats and owls!
A midnight bell, a parting groan!
These are the sounds we feed upon.’

John Fletcher



‘So something *has* been going on,’ said Laura, when she met Dame Beatrice again. ‘Gavin and his people suspected gun-running, so now it’s up to them. I gave Dimbleton as much of a tip-off as I thought was ethical, because I don’t believe he’s a villain, only a tool. I expect he’s been well paid for the hire of his boat and told not to ask too many questions. And do you know what else I think? I think Eliza Chayleigh was murdered because she *did* ask too many questions. There’s that so-called poem, you know, about only watching the shadows on the wall when the “gentlemen” go by. *And* I think Ransome Lovelaine may have been mixed up in something fishy, too, and I think some of them had the impression he’d grassed to his cousins, those two rather decent Lovelaine youngsters, and that *they* may have told their father and *he* may have told *us*. I know I haven’t much to go on in saying all this, but it would account for a lot of the things which have been happening, wouldn’t it, don’t you think?’

‘I do not think it accounts for the death of Eliza Chayleigh. Apart from solving that problem, though, I think our work here is finished and I shall be glad to return home.’

‘You don’t intend to work out our three months’ tenancy of this house?’

‘I see no particular point in doing so.’

‘The rent’s paid. Are you going to lose all those extra weeks, then? This isn’t a bad spot in which to get on with the memoirs, you know.’

‘I propose to stay only long enough to clear up the mystery I mentioned. I still want to know who occupied this house on the Wednesday before we arrived and who entertained somebody to a cup of tea here.’

‘Well, we’re sure that one of the two was Eliza Chayleigh, aren’t we?’

‘It could well be so, of course, but who was the other?’

‘One of the smugglers, I should say, was the other person with her, if they thought she was an informer. He met her here and murdered her and chucked the body into the sea. Well, you’ve heard my yarn, so now what about your own?’

‘The farmer was not in when I was admitted, but his wife received me and intimated that if I cared to wait she would send Ransome to find him. Ransome, she said, was at work on his smallholding and would probably know whereabouts on the farm his father could be found.’

‘Did she actually call the farmer Ransome’s father?’

‘Oh, yes, quite freely and openly.’

‘Then she doesn’t mind her husband’s little departure from the straight and narrow? After all, it happened after they were married, I thought, so you’d imagine she’d take a dim view.’

‘She betrayed no animosity towards either her husband or Eliza or Ransome. She is a suspiciously placid woman. Well, she left me to go and send Ransome on his errand and, in due course, when we had drunk a cup of strong tea and eaten soda-cake—’

‘Bit of a martyr in a good cause, weren’t you?’

‘It is true that I do not care for strong tea and soda-cake, but it would have been discourteous to refuse the proffered hospitality and I was anxious to be agreeable.’

‘What’s the farmer like?’

‘You saw him on the boat. He crossed with us when we arrived, if you remember.’

‘He couldn’t have been the chap who tackled Mr Lovelaine that night, I suppose?’

‘He both could have been and was.’

‘You mean he admitted it?’

‘In response to a direct question, yes, he did.’

‘But what made you think he was the one?’

‘Perhaps if I give you a complete account of the interview you will see how events shaped themselves.’

‘Oh, sorry! Yes, of course. First say what the play treats on; then read the names of the actors; and so grow to a point.’

‘Exactly. Well, he greeted me in breezy fashion and asked what he could do for me. I replied that I had some very personal questions to put to him, but that,

of course, I should understand and sympathise if he refused to answer them. At that he studied me for a while as though he were summing me up and asked whether it was anything to do with Dimbleton's boat. This intrigued me very much, as you may imagine, and I made a cautious reply to the effect that it might or might not have to do with boats, including Dimbleton's.'

'So they're on to the gun-running, are they?' he said. 'I knew it could only be a question of time.'

'So he's given the game away,' said Laura. 'Was he in on it, then?'

'He says not, but that he and Ransome knew all about it and that one small party of ornithologists were smugglers in disguise.'

'We guessed as much, didn't we? I wonder what the genuine bird-watchers made of them?'

'I doubt whether they mixed with any of the others. I think Miss Crimp had apportioned them to the chalets and had given them tables to themselves in the dining-room. She knew all about them, I'm sure.'

'I said, if you remember, that she was mixed up in the smuggling racket. That day I called on Dimbleton when he had that gipsy type with the earrings at his cottage, Crimp was there, too, and talking about fish.'

'Which you thought meant money.'

'And which I also think meant guns. Did Cranby have anything more to say about guns?'

'Only that he thought the witches' cave had been the original storehouse, but that the witches fell foul of Eliza Chayleigh because hotel guests complained of their dancing naked by moonlight. It seems that their meetings were held out in the open over by the pre-historic hut-circles, but that, following the complaints, the cave became the meeting place of the coven and another hiding-place for the weapons had to be found. However, Cranby thinks that the owners of *Puffins* had left a key with Miss Crimp when they vacated the house, and that they had an arrangement with her that, from time to time, she would have the house dusted and windows opened and that, when she was notified of an imminent holiday tenancy, she would see to it that the beds were aired.'

'But I thought *he* was the holder of the key? If this house was a hidey-hole, how did the smugglers expect to manage when the holiday tenants turned up?'

'According to Allen Cranby, they had ample notice from Miss Crimp to get rid of the merchandise and hide it elsewhere when it was known that people were coming in.'

'Yes, but where?'

‘In that locked-up old lighthouse on the east cliff, he thinks.’

‘Oh, yes. The Lovelaine kids told me they tried to get into it and couldn’t.’

‘That certainly seems to lend weight to his theory, especially as the other old lighthouse seems to have been open to the public’

‘There were that man and woman who were up on the gallery when Mrs Chayleigh’s body was spotted. I still think the witches are all part and parcel of the smuggling racket, you know.’

‘Then why did the smugglers need to find another hiding-place when the witches took over the cave?’

‘Oh, because not *all* the witches were in with the smugglers, of course. You see,’ said Laura, warming to her argument, ‘it’s so odd that those two bird-watchers were the first people to spot the body. If you ask me what I think, I think they’re a fishy couple. What were they doing up on that gallery, anyway?’

‘Watching for birds, I suppose.’

‘And spotting Eliza Chayleigh’s body. Don’t you call that a suspicious circumstance?’

‘Somebody had to spot it,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘What I would like to be able to confirm is the identity of the female relative of old Miss Chayleigh who was dispossessed by Eliza, I wonder whether Mr Lovelaine would know who it was?’

‘You don’t think that, if he does, we shall know the name of Eliza Chayleigh’s murderer, do you?’

‘Far from it, dear child. To suspect is not to know.’

‘Could it be somebody who actually lives on this island? The dead pig rather indicates that, don’t you think? There’s that empty sty at the end of Dimbleton’s garden. Is that worth investigating? Incidentally, do you really think *everybody* on the island knows about the smuggling?’

‘I could not say. A great many do, no doubt, and a great many more may suspect. The island is a very small place.’

‘What else did you glean from Allen Cranby?’

‘Nothing of any moment, so far as I can tell at present.’

‘You didn’t ask him whether Miss Crimp was mixed up in the smuggling racket? I *still* think that’s why she was in Dimbleton’s cottage that day talking about fish.’

‘I did not put the question to Allen Cranby, although I expect he could answer it if he chose.’

‘You were going to tell me about a question you *did* put to him, though. You

said he admitted attacking inoffensive little Professor Lovelaine.'

'Yes, so he did. He claimed that he had mistaken him for somebody else.'

'Did you believe him?'

'No, but I did not say so.'

'Why do you think he did go for him?'

'I think he feels that Marius Lovelaine was unduly favoured as a result of Eliza's death. He may even hold him partly responsible for it.'

'You couldn't explain that to me, could you? I don't feel so very bright at the moment.'

'You are not doing yourself justice. Besides, I can give no logical explanation of my theory. There is something I do not know.'

'What sort of something?'

'Merely the identity of the person whom Eliza Chayleigh met at *Puffins* when she was supposed to be crossing to the mainland.'

'I don't suppose we'll ever find a name for that person. What do you make of this man the young Lovelaines complain of? — the fellow who tried to get into their chalet.'

'I suppose that could have been some inebriate who had mistaken their lodging for his own.'

'He seems to have made more than one attempt to get in. You don't think it could be a vendetta directed against the Lovelaine family, do you?'

'Well, perhaps it is just as well that the family have left the island. I wonder whether your question has solved my problem?'

'How do you mean?'

'Is there a Mrs Lovelaine?'

'Oh, yes. The kids call her Boobie. Apparently, from what they tell me, she's capable of making the most fearful floaters and embarrassing one and all.'

'Dear me! Do you suppose they left her at home in order to avoid these contingencies?'

'No, she chose to stay behind. She went away before the others left and stayed with a cousin or something. It appears that she doesn't — didn't, I mean — love Eliza Chayleigh.'

'Oh, dear, oh, dear!'

'But how have I solved your problem? You don't suppose Boobie disliked Eliza enough to pop over here and murder her before the others arrived?'

'It would account for so much if she did,' said Dame Beatrice thoughtfully, 'but, although the thought is tempting, there is no proof except that Eliza must

have met *somebody* here, and the chances are that that mysterious person was the murderer, or one of the murderers. Of course, apart from Mrs Lovelaine (whose movements, I admit, invite speculation) there are two obvious suspects.'

'I agree about Miss Crimp.'

'Who would, of course, have needed an accomplice.'

'Yes, we're pretty certain there must have been somebody else. Then isn't there a chance the accomplice might be persuaded to turn Queen's evidence?'

'I think not in this case.'

'Why not?'

'I believe that the accomplice I have in mind would have been a most willing partner and had as good, although a different, reason for wishing that Eliza Chayleigh was dead.'

'I can't think who it is you've fixed on as the other murderer.'

'And I am not going to name names until or unless I obtain the evidence I need.'

'You might give me a hint. You're not thinking of Allen Cranby as Eliza's murderer, are you?'

'I am not going to commit myself, but I will give you the hint you demand. Have you ever thought any more about those desecrated headstones in the churchyard?'

'Sebastian and Margaret mentioned them to me, so of course I went and had a look at them. Somebody had had a shot at cleaning off the paint.'

'That, I venture to think, was Ransome the churchman. There had been more vandalism, apart from those black magic slogans, had there not?'

'Yes, but I don't think it had anything to do with black magic.'

'Some crude lettering, I believe you told me.'

'That's right. Somebody had tried to get rid of old Miss Chayleigh's name on one of the tombstones and substitute Eliza's.'

'It *proves* nothing but vandalism, of course, but I am inclined to recognise it as a psychological pointer.'

'But you think the accomplice had not the same motive as the murderer for wanting Eliza dead?'

'No. As I see it, both nursed a grievance, but it was not the same grievance.'

'And they decided to act at the same time? But why? And why wait years before they paid off the old score, whatever it was?'

'I think the answer is that the Lovelaine family came to Great Skua at Eliza's express invitation. That put the gunpowder among the smouldering fuel. Such, at

any rate, is my theory.'

'But if you know all this, why don't you tell the police?'

'You know the answer to that question.'

'Well, but, if you're pretty sure, the proof *must* exist somewhere. We've only got to keep on looking for it. Tell me just one more thing. You see, I know you're right, because you always *are* right, and if I can follow what you're thinking, something might crop up which is part of my knowledge, but not part of yours. Anyway, it does look as though somebody disliked the whole Chayleigh family. All the black magic paint was daubed on Chayleigh graves.'

'And an attempt made to remove old Miss Chayleigh's name and substitute Eliza's.'

'Indicates whoever did it hated both of them, as I say. But, you know, my thought on that is that it could hardly have been Crimp.'

'Ah, you think she could not have been absent long enough from the hotel to carry out the work involved?'

'Well, it wouldn't take long to daub on the red paint, but it's a different matter when it comes to cutting out one name and substituting another when you've got to do it on stone. I say, though! She couldn't be this dispossessed relative, could she?'

'We could ask her.'

'But if she's the murderer or the accomplice she'll deny the relationship.'

'Do you think Farmer Cranby was the accomplice?'

'I have not said so.'

'Well, it couldn't be *Mrs* Cranby, could it?'

'Why not? She may have spent the last thirty years in visualising herself as a deeply wronged woman in that her husband seduced Eliza who bore him a son.'

'That's all very well, and I know all about Ransome, but why should the coming of the Lovelaines have galvanised her into action after all those years? Besides, it couldn't have been their actual coming which pushed her over the edge, because, as we've already said, Eliza Chayleigh must have been dead for a week before the Lovelaines set foot on the island. And how did she and Miss Crimp ever get together over an awful business like murder?'

'I have said more than once that we have no proof of the identity of the murderer, or that the murderer may have had an accomplice. However...'

'Ah, yes, I was going to ask you about that. Why did there have to be an accomplice? To help tip the body over the top of the cliff? That's what you think must have happened, don't you?'

‘Because of the contusions on the body? Those could have been caused by the body’s having been bruised by its pounding against the rocks, of course. It was the nature of the head-wound which prompted me to think about murder in the first place. I think death was caused by the use of a sharp-edged piece of slate which somebody with malicious intent had picked up in the quarries.’

‘I thought you believed she was killed here at the back of this house.’

‘It is a simple matter to pick up a piece of slate and carry it away. I think the murder *did* take place at the back of this house. There is the evidence of the dead pig. But all this is mere speculation. There is much to be cleared up. We need some help, I’m afraid, and I do not see where it is to come from, unless the Lovelaine family have knowledge which they have not disclosed.’

‘I don’t know much about the father, but I don’t think Sebastian and Margaret have kept anything back,’ said Laura.

‘Not deliberately, I feel sure, but in talking together in their own home and in recounting their experiences, something may strike them. I propose to call upon them in the hope that it may be so.’

‘And what about the smugglers? I hope Dimbleton won’t get into trouble. I did my best for him.’

‘Gun-running is not the most innocuous of occupations.’

‘No, I agree about that. He’ll have to take his chance, of course. By the time Gavin gets our message, though, I don’t think anything will be found on the island. We still haven’t actually seen any rifles or ammunition or anything, have we, when one comes to think of it.’

‘Neither do we know where the guns, if any, came from, or what was their destination, but all that can be left to the police.’

‘Anyway, we’ve spoilt the smugglers’ little game, I expect, and the authorities can pick the stuff up at sea, perhaps, but the whole thing must be on a very small scale, wouldn’t you think?’

‘Even one gun is a lethal object, of course,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and it gives me great satisfaction to think that we may have helped to queer somebody’s pitch, however small it may be. Our dear Robert must be told all about that locked old lighthouse.’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The End of the String

‘Turn darkness into day,
Conjectures into truth,
Believe what the envious say,
Let age interpret youth.’

Thomas Campion



As soon as she and Laura had returned from Great Skua to the Stone House at Wandles Parva, Dame Beatrice rang up Gavin and asked him to come over.

‘Well, that’s fine,’ he said, when he heard the story of their short stay on the island. ‘It’s certain that we shan’t pinch these smugglers on the island itself, but we’ll get them all right if they try to shift any more of the stuff, and then we must have a coast-guard station there. Moreover, we can get away with ransacking that old lighthouse, because we can claim it as belonging to Trinity House and therefore that it’s Government property. I’ll let the Customs and Excise people know. They’ll soon sort it all out. But your theory that Eliza Chayleigh was murdered comes into a different category altogether. I don’t see that you’ve much to go on, either, even in view of the open verdict given at the inquest. I’ll ask for a full report and see what your inspector chap has got. What’s your own next move, Dame B?’

‘I propose to visit the Lovelaines who, by this time, will have been reunited.’

As it happened, Laura had the address because she had promised to write to the two young people. Marius and his children welcomed her and she was introduced to Clothilde. She came to the point with what Laura, who had accompanied her, thought was singular abruptness.

‘Not to beat about the bush,’ she said, ‘I am looking for evidence that your sister, Mr Lovelaine, was murdered either by Constance Crimp and Ruth Cranby, or by the latter and an accomplice, probably a man.’

‘The farmer’s wife? What can *she* have had to do with it? There was no communication between the Cranbys and Lizzie!’ exclaimed Marius. ‘My son

has told me that neither Allen Cranby nor Ransome Lovelaine ever visited the hotel. They supplied dairy and garden produce, but that was the extent of their dealings with Miss Crimp and Lizzie.'

'So far as the two men are concerned, that is very likely true. I doubt whether Ruth Cranby was a stranger to Miss Crimp, though, and one must remember also that it is possible that Dimbleton and Miss Crimp had built up a flourishing little business smuggling guns on to the island and exporting them at a profit.'

'Yes, it was guns,' said Clothilde, in a small voice. The others stared at her, her husband in amazement, her children with sardonic amusement and Dame Beatrice interrogatively. 'Oh, yes,' Clothilde went on. 'You had better have the whole story. It is time it all came out.'

'You do not need to tell Dame Beatrice your reason for going to Great Skua,' said Marius, recovering himself and speaking gently. 'It has nothing to do with the present discussion.'

'She had better hear it all,' said Clothilde, 'if we are going to talk about Eliza's death. To my shame, Dame Beatrice, I ran out of money. In fact, I got into debt and had to overdraw at the bank. This had happened before, and on that occasion my husband took a lenient view which I did not deserve. I could not face him with the same situation again.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Boobie!' exclaimed her son. 'It was a joint account! You had every right to draw on it.'

'But not to get myself into debt and then to overdraw on it,' said his mother, determined to martyr herself, 'and when the same thing happened a short time ago, Dame Beatrice, I felt I could not go to my husband and confess until I had tried to find some means—any means—to put things right. My husband himself, I thought, found me the answer. He received a letter of invitation from his sister to spend a paid holiday on Great Skua at the hotel she owned. When I studied the brochure she sent, I realised that her prices were high and this caused me to decide that she must be in a fair way of business.'

'Instead of which, the hotel is head over ears in debt, just like you,' said Sebastian.

'I could not possibly know that,' said his mother, impatient at the interruption. 'Well, Dame Beatrice, I knew that my husband had always sent money regularly to his sister. You see, he had inherited everything from his parents and she had been left nothing. It occurred to me, therefore, that by going to Great Skua I could point out to Eliza that for many years she had been sent money which belonged rightly — that is to say, lawfully — to our family purse.'

I then intended to ask her to hand enough of it back to me to clear my debt to the bank. It was not a great sum and, had it been my first peccadillo in this respect, I should have had no hesitation in going to my husband and confessing what had happened.'

'Shows a lack of confidence in a loving spouse that you didn't,' muttered Sebastian. 'Oh, Boobie, darling, well art thou named!'

'I have other resources,' said Marius to Dame Beatrice before he turned an irate face towards his son. 'There was no need for my wife to distress herself.'

'At first—before I over-spent—I was extremely angry that Marius was determined to accept the invitation and take the children with him,' continued Clothilde, 'and I think my over-spending was really a kind of revenge. Later on, when I came to my senses, I was relieved that I had taken my stand. On the excuse of going off on holiday to my cousin's, I pawned my watch and one or two things for the fare — this was before the others were due to travel — and I went to Great Skua, intending to go from there to Cousin Marie's cottage, as I had said I would.'

'And did you contact Mrs Chayleigh?' asked Dame Beatrice, as the narrator paused.

'No, I did not. I enquired for Eliza at the hotel and they said at first that she was far too busy, they thought, to see anybody. (I did not give my real name at the desk, but used my maiden name, which I did not believe Eliza would remember. I was most anxious, you see, that, when Marius and the children arrived, they should not be told that I had been there). I said that my business was urgent, so I was told that if I cared to book a room they would let Eliza know that I was there. Well, I needed a room, in any case, so I booked in.

'In the morning I enquired again for Eliza, but the woman at the reception desk said that Eliza had gone over to the mainland on hotel business.'

'Which day of the week would this have been?' Dame Beatrice enquired. 'I mean, which day did you arrive on Great Skua?'

'It was on the Thursday, nearly a week before my husband and the children were due to arrive. I was particularly distressed that I could not see Eliza immediately, since I had given my cousin a date for my arrival at her cottage and I most certainly did not want her telephoning my home to find out why I had not arrived. To add to my perturbation, I learned that there was not another boat until the Saturday, so I was left to get through the whole of Friday the best way I could. Well, to pass the time, I went to look at a house which the chambermaid had mentioned as being to let for the summer. I walked up to the front window,

but could not see much because of the curtains, so, having plenty of time in hand, I went round to the back. There was a most unpleasant sight just outside the kitchen door.'

'We know about the pig,' said Dame Beatrice.

'Covered in flies! And blood all around and about! It was absolutely nauseating, and I left the house more quickly than I had come to it. Before I got back to the hotel, however, it struck me that it was very strange to have killed a pig and left it outside the kitchen door, so I went to take another look. There was nobody about. I tried the outhouses. All but one were open. I looked in through the window of the locked shed and saw something under a sheet. It looked so much like a body covered up that, without more ado, I fled back to the hotel, but on the way upstairs I ran into the woman Crimp.

' "Ah", she said, "you are finding something to do with yourself, I hope. I am sorry you've missed Mrs Chayleigh, but she'll be here on Saturday's boat." '

' "I didn't want Mrs Chayleigh," I said. She looked surprised.

' "You asked for Eliza," she said. "I took it for granted you meant Mrs Chayleigh. She is the only woman on the island, so far as I know, whose name is Eliza."

' "This is Great Skua, isn't it?" I asked.

' "It's Great Skua, certainly," she answered. "Oh, well, I must get on. You haven't been looking at *Puffins*, have you?"

' "Puffins?" I said. "I don't know one kind of seabird from another." '

'They call the nearby house *Puffins*,' said Marius.

'Well, how could I know that? There was nothing to say so. Anyway, I was not going to tell anybody that I had been to the house because I knew there was something strange about it, apart from the thing under the sheet.'

'Something strange?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'There were big packing cases in all the other sheds. I was curious enough to prise up a loose board in one of them. It contained rifles. I was seriously alarmed, then, for my own safety, as I realised that no stranger would be expected to explore the premises without permission. I wondered whether any eyes had been watching when I approached the house and what would happen if such had been the case.'

'Yes, we live in a lawless age,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I can only add that all the packing-cases had been removed before Laura and I moved in.'

'I cannot think what possessed you, Clothilde,' said Marius severely.

'Well, how was I to know about all those guns and things?'

‘I think you must tell your story to the police,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘It is most important.’

‘Well, really, I feel I must agree with Dame Beatrice,’ said Marius. ‘What do you think, my dear?’ he asked, turning to his wife and speaking in a gentle tone. ‘Are you prepared to do your duty as a citizen?’

‘Oh, I suppose so,’ Clothilde replied.

‘Well, if you do,’ said Sebastian, ‘be sure to have your solicitor present and don’t answer anything unless he says you may, will you?’

‘I’m not an idiot,’ replied his mother with asperity.

‘I must have notice of that reply,’ murmured her son.

‘Besides,’ his mother went on, ‘I have not finished my story. By the time I got to Cousin Marie’s cottage I was almost penniless.’

‘Surely you didn’t suppose you could ask Cousin Marie for your fare home!’ exclaimed Marius.

‘I was in great distress, but when I arrived at the cottage Cousin Marie was even more affected. Miss Potter had left her.’

‘How do you mean — left her?’ asked Marius.

‘I mean exactly what I say. Miss Potter had gone off, leaving a note in which she said that her expectations had at last been realised, so she could stop being a burden on Cousin Marie, as justice had been done at last and she was off to foreign parts and hoped never to return to England.’

‘Didn’t she even say goodbye?’ asked Margaret.

‘Apparently not. Then Marie told me something which absolutely astonished me. Who do you think Miss Potter turns out to be?’

‘I gave up guessing games when I left the nursery,’ said Sebastian.

‘Why, it seems that Marie had known all the time that Miss Potter was second cousin to that old Miss Chayleigh who left Eliza the hotel (only it was a house then) and the estate on Great Skua.’

‘Well, that accounts for two things,’ said Sebastian. ‘It accounts for Cousin Marie’s putting up with that crawler for all these years...’

‘Yes, Marie was always looking out for the main chance,’ continued Clothilde. ‘I suppose Miss Potter gave out that she had expectations and Marie hoped to cash in on them some fine day.’

‘It also accounts for their visit to Great Skua last year,’ said Sebastian. ‘I always thought that visit was a bit odd. Cheltenham and Bournemouth were their kind of holiday places, not a bit of granite stuck out in the Atlantic Ocean. I suppose there was something in Eliza’s acknowledgment of their booking which

gave the Potter cause to think that Eliza was leaving her something substantial in her will. Perhaps she thought she owed her something, as old Miss Chayleigh had left her nothing.'

'I wonder,' said Margaret, 'whether it was the Potter creep who altered the name on that tombstone?'

'When they visited Great Skua last year?' said Sebastian. 'I should think that's more than likely. The stone-cutting was very roughly done and wasn't all that fresh.'

'The red paint was, though. Done by Farmer Allen Cranby, the other relative, I shouldn't wonder.'

'I say,' exclaimed Sebastian, addressing himself to Dame Beatrice, 'you don't think *Potter* was Crimp's accessory to the murder of Aunt Eliza, do you? I mean, *somebody* must have helped Crimp to haul the body out of *Puffins* and heave it over the cliff.'

'Now that I have heard Mrs Lovelaine's story, I certainly think the police would like to have an account of Miss Potter's movements after she left your cousin's cottage,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I wonder when she took her departure?'

'Oh, I can tell you that,' said Clothilde. 'It would have been early on the Saturday morning before I got to the cottage.'

'Well, that seems to settle one thing,' said Laura. 'If she was with your cousin up to that Saturday morning, she has a clear alibi for the time Eliza Chayleigh was murdered.'

'But, from what I know of Eliza's will, there was no mention of Miss Potter in it,' said Marius. 'All I learned was that the money and property were to be divided among Ransome, Miss Crimp and myself.'

'She may have made a new will,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Testators are known to do that without reference to former or subsequent beneficiaries.'

'I wonder how soon Miss Potter got to know about Eliza Chayleigh's death, though,' said Laura. 'News travels slowly from Great Skua.'

'There is such an object as Dimbleton's fast motorboat,' said Margaret.

'*And* a trip the farmer and his wife took on it,' said Sebastian. 'Weren't they away from the island rather longer than was expected?'

'But that means they knew Miss Potter,' said Laura.

'Yes, they could have done,' said Marius. 'We know that Miss Potter and Cousin Marie visited Great Skua last summer. And there is something else which perhaps I should mention, since Eliza's will has been questioned. It seems that, at her death, a reasonably substantial sum of money was to come to me under the

will of our parents. It was to be held in trust for Eliza until she married, but, if she did not marry, it was to come to me and I am expecting to get it as soon as her affairs (which appear to be in some disorder) can be settled and her debts paid.'

'And you are certain that she did not marry?' asked Dame Beatrice. 'A marriage, as you must know, would make any former will invalid.'

'She did marry,' said Clothilde, in a very subdued tone. 'At least, I know she intended to, so I suppose she did.'

'*What!*' exclaimed Marius.

'That is why I was prepared to throw myself on her mercy. I thought she would get the money.'

'But what on earth makes you think she married, my dear?'

'She wrote to me. I did not show you the letter because I knew how disappointed you would be not to get the money, but it seemed to me certain that she fully intended to marry and that it would be a *fait accompli* long before you and the children got there. I must say, in fairness, that it wasn't a gloating, nasty letter, but it *was* rather a triumphant one. She put at the end of it: *You may break the news to my brother Marius if you wish, but I would prefer to tell him myself now that he is bringing the children to see me in July.* It came so near the end of term, when you were busy marking the students' papers, that I didn't bother you with it.'

'Well, there is one good thing about it, Mrs Lovelaine,' said Laura bluntly. 'If you knew there was no money in it for you, you can't be suspected of having had any hand in causing Mrs Chayleigh's death.'

'But who on earth could she have married?' asked Marius. 'There was nobody on the island who would have been suitable.'

'Except J. Dimbleton, boatman, perhaps,' suggested Laura. 'I always thought it was a bit fishy that he had money enough to buy himself a place in the syndicate.'

'But Eliza would have disapproved strongly of the smuggling!' said Marius. 'Was not that her reason for wanting to visit the mainland, even though she knew how busy the hotel would be when all those ornithologists turned up?'

'We don't know why she wanted to go over to the mainland,' said Laura, 'but if the hotel *was* in debt, and if Crimp, as partner, was turning nasty about it, Mrs Chayleigh may have decided on any port in a storm and married Dimbleton in order to get the money your parents left in trust for her.'

'I doubt very much whether she did marry,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Surely the

news would have leaked out? Ransome seems to have made no mention of it to Sebastian and Margaret. Apart from that, Dimbleton himself would hardly have kept it a secret if he expected to gain by it. I think you will find that his part in the smugglers' syndicate was bought out of his own savings.'

'So my journey to Great Skua would have been all in vain, even had Eliza been alive?' asked Clothilde.

'Oh, Boobie! Well art thou named!' exclaimed her son.

'Oh, don't repeat yourself!' said his mother crossly.

'Well,' said Laura's husband, when next he saw Dame Beatrice and his wife, 'armed with your information our fellows got busy and Miss Crimp and Dimbleton are now in custody. They are being held on a charge of smuggling weapons. We can't pin anything else on either of them at present, although I'd like to get Miss Crimp on a capital charge. She's vindictive, which Dimbleton is not, although I'm sure he helped to dispose of the body.'

'But they didn't dispose of it,' said Laura. 'It was caught up in those rocks outside the witches' cave. Dimbleton knows those waters well. He wouldn't have pitched the body in unless he was sure it would be carried right out to sea. I think you've got the wrong pig by the ear. What has he to say for himself?'

'Denies that he had any hand in it at all, as I said. Confesses to helping the gun-runners and says that three of them (whose names he refuses to divulge) were responsible for punishing Ransome Lovelaine because they believed him to be an informer...'

'To whom, though?' asked Laura.

'To Sebastian and Margaret. They regarded that friendship as suspicious. Ransome and his father knew all about the gun-running, as did everybody else on the island, including Miss Crimp, who, as you yourself suspected, was in it up to the neck.'

'But Ransome and Allen Cranby were not involved, were they?'

'No, they were known to disapprove of it.'

'Did the smugglers really intend Ransome to drown?'

'He himself says not. They merely intended to frighten him. It was Allen Cranby who confessed, as you know, to attacking Marius Lovelaine when he left *Puffins* that night.'

'Why on earth did he do it, though?'

'He has nursed a grudge against the Lovelaines ever since Eliza was turned out by her parents. He also tried to force his way into the children's chalet with the intention of beating up Sebastian.'

‘But the kids and their father were entirely innocent parties,’ protested Laura.

‘Yes, he admits that his ideas weren’t rational, but that Eliza’s death had triggered off his resentment of the way her family had treated her.’

‘What about the red-paint slogans on the gravestones and the Devil’s ladder Sebastian saw in the church tower? He told me about that when we were bathing one morning,’ said Laura.

‘Oh, that was the church cleaner herself. She wasn’t quite such a white witch as she made herself out to be.’

‘So all the abysmal Potter did was to deface the headstone of Gwendolyne Chayleigh and the other Chayleigh ancestors.’

‘Yes, and last year, at that. We’ve been to see the Lovelaines’ cousin and (upset and resentful as she is over losing her friend from whom she had hoped to gain so much) she is adamant that Miss Potter did not leave the cottage until the Saturday morning after Eliza died.’

‘I did not think, for that reason, that she could have had any hand in Eliza’s death,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I still think you should look closely at the farmer’s wife as Miss Crimp’s accomplice in the murder.’

‘Yes, but why?’

‘I think a long-standing grudge, fed by Miss Crimp, may have flared up, you know. Such things do happen.’

‘After thirty years?’ asked Gavin, doubtfully.

‘I think so. Left to herself, I doubt whether Ruth Cranby would ever have taken any action. From what I know of her, she is a remarkably placid woman. But old resentments burn deep, and there was always Ransome to remind her that, whereas Eliza, in her busy and headstrong way, had borne Allen Cranby a son, she herself was childless.’

‘But this is nothing but surmise, Dame B. You haven’t really anything to go on.’

‘Yes, I have two things. I firmly support Laura’s argument that, had Dimbleton been a party to the murder, he would have made certain that the body was safely disposed of. I have also a conviction that if two people took tea together in *Puffins* a day or two before my servants moved in to make ready for Laura and myself, those tea-drinkers are much more likely to have been two women than one woman and a man.’

‘And Dimbleton never drank tea,’ said Laura. ‘The only thing which bothers me, though, is why Eliza consented to take that food down to *Puffins* and, more than that, why she and the Crimp took tea together there. Eliza wouldn’t have

wanted to linger if she was planning to catch the boat. In any case, the Crimp must have followed her up pretty quickly, yet we've heard of nobody who saw her leave the hotel that morning.'

'I think I would like to have a word with that chambermaid who confessed to the Lovelaine children that she left her duties and descended to the landing-stage to have a word with her young man,' said Dame Beatrice.

'Well, if you're going back to Great Skua, I wish you'd see what more you can find out,' said Gavin. 'I think the local police have come to a dead end and they can't hold Crimp much longer merely on suspicion. There's such a thing as *habeas corpus*. We can't even prove, to the satisfaction of the courts, that Crimp was a prime mover in the smuggling racket. We can hold Dimbleton, on his own confession, for smuggling but smuggling isn't murder.'

'In this case it probably led to it, if the guns were shipped to Northern Ireland or to one of the Arab guerrilla bands,' said Laura. 'When do we go?'

'Tomorrow. If we start early, we shall be in time to catch the boat. You know, there is an important witness who has not yet testified.'

'Oh?'

'The pig. Let us ask Henri to join us.'

Dame Beatrice's chef was a corpulent, jovial man, the husband of her somewhat vinegary maid. He presented himself without his apron and cap of office and appeared in a brown suit of undistinguished cut and a waistcoat of peculiar splendour.

'Madame wishes to give orders for lunch?'

'It would be a needless departure from custom, my accomplished one,' Dame Beatrice replied in French. 'No,' she added, in English, 'it is about pigs. You are an authority on pigs?'

'Of the human kind, madame?'

'No, no. I believe you buried a pig at the house called *Puffins* on the island of Great Skua.'

'It was the flies, madame. Much good money gone to waste.'

'I understand. Can you describe this pig?'

'It was of a kind extraordinary. Figure to yourself, madame, a large pig which has but one large circle of black upon the flank, this being natural to it, not a bruise, not a wound, not a brand mark, but a part of the animal bestowed on it at its birth and by the good God, no doubt.'

'A Gloucester Old Spot,' explained Laura. 'Not a breed to be seen everywhere. Large White, Berkshire, Essex and Wessex, even Tamworths, apart

from all the crosses, yes. Gloucester Old Spots—where are we getting to, by the way?’

‘I do not know, but Henri’s description of the pig may help. However, as soon as we get to Great Skua, a word with the chambermaid.’

The chambermaid was willing, indeed anxious, to talk.

‘Not as we know what’s to become of us,’ she said, ‘with no wages and all that, while Miss Crimp is with the police and poor Mrs Chayleigh dead and gone.’

‘Who is in charge here, then?’ Dame Beatrice asked.

‘Miss Crimp told the head waiter to carry on until one of the other two came to take over, but it don’t seem nobody’s interested.’

By ‘the other two’ Dame Beatrice understood that Miss Crimp must have meant her fellow legatees Marius and Ransome. She made no comment, but came to the reason for her visit.

‘You remember me, I expect,’ she said, ‘but you do not know that, in a sense, I represent the forces of law and order. I mention it, as I feel it may give you reassurance. We go back to the day on which Mrs Chayleigh left this hotel alive for the last time.’

‘I’ve no wish to recall it, madam.’

‘Probably not.’

‘If I ’adn’t a-gone down to the beach, would it ’ave made any difference?’

‘Not the slightest, so do not think of that again. Can you recall what you heard Miss Crimp say to Mrs Chayleigh about a parcel or basket of food which was to go to the house that my secretary and I subsequently rented?’

‘I think so, madam, though p’raps not the exact words. So far as I recollect, Miss Crimp says, “Well, if you must, you must.” Mrs Chayleigh says, “It’s my dooty, Constance, as I’ve told you before.”’

‘Are you sure that she meant she had told *Miss Crimp*?’

‘Oh, yes, madam, and I knowed what she meant, too. We all knowed. It took Mrs Chayleigh to do something about it.’

‘The gun-running?’

‘Don’t matter sayin’ so now, ’cos it’s all over, ain’t it?’

‘But the two women seemed to be on friendly terms?’

‘So far as I could tell.’

‘Where were you when you overheard this conversation?’

‘In the entrance doin’ of the floor before I started in on the chalets.’

‘And your employers?’

‘Be’ind the counter where the guests clocks in. I don’t reckon they knowed I was there, ’cos they couldn’t see me from where they was.’

‘And Miss Crimp asked Mrs Chayleigh to leave this food at *Puffins*.’

‘Ah, her did.’

‘And Mrs Chayleigh made no demur?’

‘I don’t know, madam, do I? I ’eard Miss Crimp ask, and then I goes off to get me gear for doin’ out the chalets.’

‘But intending to slip away down to the beach.’

‘I never let up on me work. I made it all up when I come back.’

‘Of course. You saw Mrs Chayleigh set off for *Puffins*...’

‘Yes, I did that.’

‘How long afterwards did Miss Crimp follow her?’

‘Miss Crimp?’

‘That is what I said.’

‘But she couldn’t of follered ’er, could she?’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, I watched ’er goin’ the other way, didn’t I?’

‘How was that?’

‘Well, Mrs Chayleigh went one way and Miss Crimp went the other, over towards Farmer Cranby’s.’

‘Are you sure of this?’

‘Well, yes. I had to be careful, didn’t I, seein’ I was sneakin’ off to the beach.’

‘But you did see Miss Crimp leave the hotel?’

‘Oh, yes, I seen her go.’

‘And Mrs Chayleigh, too?’

‘Oh, yes, but about ’arf an hour after. I thought at the time it was funny.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, with the boat comin’ in, and all that, it seemed funny them both goin’ out of the ’otel like that.’

‘Why didn’t you tell the police about it?’

‘That inspector never asked me, and I didn’t want it to come out as I’d been out of the ’otel myself just when they think poor Mrs Chayleigh got killed.’

‘Well, you must certainly tell them now.’

‘Well, this is the first bit of evidence we have that Miss Crimp was out of the hotel at what must have been the crucial time,’ said the inspector. ‘We questioned all the servants, of course, but it’s always a busy time when the

summer boats come in, and nobody could say for certain whether Miss Crimp was in or out until you got a definite statement from this girl. I'll talk to her and get her evidence down in writing. At your suggestion we've managed to trace Miss Potter. It seems that while she and her friend, Mrs Lovelaine's cousin, were over last year, Miss Potter wormed her way into Eliza Chayleigh's good graces by pleading extreme poverty owing to the fact that Mrs Chayleigh had been given the inheritance which she thought should have been enjoyed by herself and Farmer Cranby, as old Miss Chayleigh's nearest relatives. She had heard nothing about Eliza's death when she left her friend's house. She had saved the money Eliza gave her and fled because Miss Crimp, who certainly seems a right one, had been threatening to accuse her of blackmailing Eliza on the score of the smuggling. It was nothing but impudent bluff, of course, but people like Miss Potter are easily frightened. Well, when I've got this girl's evidence down on paper, I'll face Miss Crimp with it, and we'll see how she reacts. She'll have to produce chapter and verse as to where she went and what she did on that particular morning.'

'And the pig?'

'Oh, yes, the pig came from Cranby's farm. There hadn't been a pig in Dimbleton's sty for years. We tackled Cranby. His wife's away again and he's had to confess he doesn't know where she is. He says the pig "disappeared" and that's all we can get out of him.'

'Well, when you've found Mrs Cranby and confronted her with Miss Crimp, I think you will find you have Eliza Chayleigh's murderers,' said Dame Beatrice.

'Think they'll rat on one another, madam?'

'Time will show,' said Dame Beatrice; and it did.

—<>—<>—<>—

[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A 3S Release— v1, html]

[November 13, 2006]